who we have tamed

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who we have tamed

by JodyJuliana

Summary

Returning home from work late at night, Will finds a catboy on the side of the road that he can't help but save. Having learned about what Matthew went through, Graham firmly decides to help him, but his moral principles stop him from bloody revenge on his abuser. Luckily, at that moment a psychiatrist appears in his life, pushing him to take the necessary measures.

Notes

The events take place right before and in the first half of the first season, but the plot develops differently for the most part. First, there are cat people, second, Will picks up Matthew instead of Winston from the side of the road, and third, Mason Verger is already doing his terrible deeds. It's going to be a long story, lemme tell you, and I'll try to update it as often as possible. The central ship is the brownham. Hannibal has a crush on Will, but it's one-sided (though there will be moments that may appeal to hannigram shippers as well). There are some pretty nasty moments in the story (because of Mason), and though I'm not describing them in detail, there will be mention of rape and hints of child abuse. I can only guarantee you that the asshole will get what he deserves at the end, and in general there will be a happy ending for us. I hope you enjoy it!

Chapter 1

Will usually got home from his work at the academy before dark, but tonight it was as if everything around him was preventing him from leaving on time. First he had to listen to a few students' answers to an assignment, and two of them were mostly just trying to babble on and on, avoiding answering his questions, so it took longer than he'd originally intended; then he decided to check a few essays so he wouldn't have to do it over the weekend at home, surrounded by dogs that would rightfully demand his attention after such a busy week. When he finally started packing up and was on his way out of the office, he happened to encounter Alana, who was actually kind of even nice to talk to, since the woman had always been sympathetic to his particular attitude toward socializing and didn't try to look into his eyes like so many others did; she was pleasant. He even liked her a bit, however, she had never talked to him in private, just like this time - there was a student nearby who was the subject of their conversation. Will didn't like this student, but he tried to be patient and not make himself look like too much of an asshole, trying to be nice, especially since the guy wasn't all that useless - he had two trucks of enthusiasm, eyes burning with this job and, which was far more important than all of that (in Will's strictly personal opinion), a savvy and flexible mind. Because of this, he'd agreed to this conversation, which was increasingly delaying his chance to get home in time for the dogs.

After that, the obstacles didn't end - the road he had been driving calmly to work on in the morning was blocked due to a terrible accident, and the man had to turn around and take a much longer route, stopping several times in traffic. Eventually he had to stop at a gas station (at which he also spent an agonizingly long time) because he suddenly realized that there wasn't enough gas left to get home without problems, and as he headed down the empty highway to Wolf Trap it was already starting to get really dark.

He turned on his headlights so he could see the road better. Rain began to drum on the glass, and Will wondered if it would be muddy tomorrow morning and whether the dogs would have to be washed after the walk. In his reverie about the coming weekend and the pressing matters at hand, he doesn't even immediately realize why the usual view from the car seems to have changed slightly, as if a spot had appeared on the periphery of his mind working on automatic. He slows down, and only then, frowning a little, looks at the light spot on the side of the road.

The spot gradually takes its shape, and Will realizes that it is a man, and that he is sitting right on the pavement, wearing dirty torn (obviously not on purpose) jeans and the same white T-shirt, which was white only nominally, because it was all ripped and stained with dirt and, it seems, blood. The odd stranger didn't even react to the headlights aimed at him, staring blankly ahead of himself, oblivious to the car that had pulled up and stopped nearby. Graham takes a closer look at him and notices something that wasn't visible in the semi-darkness - dark ears and a tail. The boy - who was clearly in his early twenties, about the same age as Will's students - had pressed his ears back against his hair, purely by instinct, to keep the water from the downpour from getting into them. He hugged himself with his tail and did not move it at all. His gaze was distant, and he was clearly in some serious shock, and breathed heavily, as if he had recently run for a long time and had just stopped. His body

was shivering from the cold, his hair was wet and sticking to his forehead, his lips were pale, and there was a rather deep cut on his chin, the blood from which had been only partially washed away by the rain.

Graham didn't think about whether to help or not, the choice was obvious. He was examining him like he usually examined strays to see how aggressive they were and what approach to take to come up and lure them in, to save them from starvation and cold death and to help treat the wounds left by past owners, mental or physical ones (or, more often, both). After analyzing the situation, Will, without turning off the engine or the headlights, carefully steps out of the car, leaving the door ajar. He walks slowly toward the stranger, tilting his head slightly to the side, examining the expression on his face, which remains as blank as ever. He runs his gaze over his body once more, wondering what could have happened to him. It would probably be a good idea to report everything to the police as soon as they got home - but he needed to clarify things with the man first, lest he make things worse. Their society had certain laws protecting people like him, of course, and it had been impossible to legally buy them at some auction and brand them as your property for like fifty years by now (it was frightening to even think about it; sometimes Will was sickened by what people like him had done - and sometimes still continue to do - to other people, just because they looked a little different). However, big enough money decided everything, and there were loopholes in the laws that were skillfully exploited by dishonest lawyers willing to drive over any morals in a truck back and forth. Of course, cat people were a different species, although very close evolutionarily to humans, but they were intelligent, they could speak and, in fact, were not much different from the usual people. They could even have joint offspring, devoid of any particular genetic diseases, which is what many human rights activists have been insisting on in recent decades, having achieved the legalization of marriages between humans and cat people. Of course, they had certain distinctive innate characteristics, besides the obvious ones, that made them somewhat different from humans - greater agility, heightened senses, certain patterns of behavior, etc. - but none of these were anything that really prevented them from being normal members of society. In civilized countries they had long ago been fully integrated into the community, and even here, in the states, they had the right to vote and to be elected, they studied at universities and sometimes held good positions in big companies; Will had met some such students in the academy and even one teacher, and in Arab countries, as he knew, cat people were considered almost sacred beings (which, however, did not cancel the illegal trade on the black market). They were such normal and human-like members of society that Graham had even recently lectured about one of them becoming a serial killer. *Cat people could be psychopaths and sociopaths too, kids, so we're definitely really alike.*

Except that the percentage of being victimized by some psychopath was much higher for the likes of this stranger. There are too many perverts and just plain awful people in the world who, at best, see cat people as a nice piece of jewelry, like an expensive watch. The law forbade enslavement, but there were so many "buts" in it that Will sometimes began to think it had been written by slave owners, which might not be too far from the truth. He remembers how, while still working for the police, he had to be in the house of a rich man who had a young boy lying on the floor at his feet in a large cot, staring tensely at Will and his partner. The rich man had said that "c'mon, they like it," but Graham, even without empathy, could sense how humiliating it all was to the poor boy, who had a bell jingling around his neck at the slightest movement. Will felt shame, and he didn't know if it was this young man's shame, or his own shame for all of humanity, or shame that he didn't know how to help since he had

no legal leverage. Officially these two were married, which meant there wasn't much that could be done. Marriage between humans and cat people was a grace as well as a curse, for though the law had passed, it was full of certain clauses, the dangers of which the activists, no matter how much they shouted, could not warn an already satisfied society. It was only a matter of time before the tide of discontent and awareness would rise again, and Will could only wonder when that would finally happen.

Graham walked cautiously a few paces closer, showing his hands in advance to demonstrate the purity of his intentions. "Hey, buddy," Will gently tried to call out to him, as he usually did with dogs, but the young man continued to stare ahead of him, clearly in shock. Graham bit his lip, contemplating what should be done to avoid scaring the poor guy even more, and decided to carefully remove his jacket, not yet soaked through. "I'm going to come closer now and put this on you to cover you from the rain, okay? I'm not going to hurt you. I'm FBI, I can help you" he decides not to specify that he's from the FBI academy, figuring that would be too much information for someone who still isn't really responding to him in the first place. Will takes a couple more steps and cautiously squats down next to him. The rain continues to drum on the wet pavement, puddles already beginning to form. Graham reaches out and touches the stranger's forearm lightly, and only then does he finally react to his presence, flinching and trying to get to his feet. Will gently squeezes his arm, trying to make eye contact. "Hey-hey-hey-hey, it's okay, it's okay, I'm not going to hurt you, I want to help" he says softly so as not to startle him with his loud voice, and the guy, shaking with either fear or cold, stares at him like he's been stumped by a wild predator. Will strokes him with his thumb as he continues to hold him, and with his free hand he lifts his jacket to eye level. "I'm going to put this on you and help you get in the car, okay? I'll take you to a place where you'll be safe, I promise" he assures, sensing the man's disbelief and panic, seeing it in his bright green eyes. Nonetheless, the stranger stops trying to get up or break free, and that lets Graham exhale. "Okay. Let me cover you up" he gently releases his arm to grab the jacket more comfortably and throw it over the young man's shoulders, "that's it. Now let's hurry up and get in the car, it’s really chilly out here".

Will holds out his hand to him as he stands up, and the catboy looks up at him somewhat awkwardly, hugging himself, his fingers clutching at the fabric of his jacket. He looks at the outstretched hand, hesitating, but then it's as if he hears something behind his back, some rustling in the bushes - his ears twitch and turn in the right direction, and then he turns his head there, just for a few moments, and then grabs Graham's hand, jumping to his feet and clutching the man's palm in his own very tightly, hiding behind his back. Will is a little lost, frowning, but reflexively shields him with his body, peering in the direction the sound came from, but seeing nothing there. It could well have been a deer - there's a forest nearby, and they come here sometimes. Or an alligator. Or, well, the man this stranger is trying to get away from. Either way, Will decides not to test fate, and takes the guy to the car, opening the door and helping him get in.

After closing the door, he quickly circles the car, looking in the right direction again, but still doesn't see anything there, and just gets in the driver's seat, turning on the heater and seat warmers to keep the young man warm as they drive home. "I'll take you to my place, there you can warm up and recover a bit" Will tries to speak in a soft voice, like he does with his dogs when they're at the vet, and looks at the road as they keep driving forward. "Then you can tell me what happened and I'll help you" he looks at him, seeing how he's still shaking

trying to keep warm in his jacket, but at least his gaze already looks a little more alive, he's trying to look around, albeit with a lot of caution. *Trying to assess the danger of the situation, the danger of the man beside him,* Graham realizes. He nods to himself. "I'm Will Graham, by the way. Can you tell me your name?" he asks gently.

The young man is silent for quite some time, and Will manages to think that the man won't tell him anything yet, when suddenly he still hears his quiet voice. "Matthew. Matthew Brown" he replies, his lips still twitching slightly and his gaze running down the windshield. When he heard Graham's question, he immediately remembered what he'd been called lately, and those nasty names had embedded themselves in his flesh like tattoo ink; and yet part of him was grateful that his captor hadn't used his name. It would have been ruined for the rest of his days; he would have had to get a new one.

He still wasn't sure if he'd been rescued, though. The man next to him did look harmless and seemed willing to help, but if there was one thing Matthew had learned in his twenty-four years, it was that you can't trust anyone. What if he was one of Mason's men? Sure, Brown couldn't recognize him, and he didn't look like one of his Italian mercenaries, but who knows - like, why would someone be driving out in the middle of nowhere at this late hour at all? It was suspicious. And though Brown sensed no danger from him, he knew he had to be ready to run away again at any moment.

"All right, Matthew," Will nods, casting a glance at him. Matthew looks out the window. "I know you're pretty scared right now, and that you have no reason to trust me, but I really won't hurt you. I live not far from here, it would be better to take you to me rather than turn around and go straight to the hospital. You're not seriously injured?" he asks, trying to keep his voice soft. His experience calming dogs turns out really helpful. If Brown had trusted him a little more, he could have patted him on the shoulder, but he realized that in this situation that would probably only make things worse. So he only glanced at him from time to time to check on the young man's condition.

"Nothing broken, so I guess I'm fine" he says and tenses up a little as they pass the turnoff to the farm. Will doesn't turn there and Matthew, who had been holding his breath, exhales, relaxing just a little. He looks carefully at Graham, allowing himself to sniff slightly to assess the situation. "You have dogs, Mr. Graham?" he asks suddenly, and Will raises his eyebrows in surprise and looks away from the road at him, though quickly remembering about the safety rules. He guesses that Matthew smelled the odor from him, or rather from the car in which he took one of the dogs to the vet two days ago.

"I have six dogs" he replies awkwardly. "They're docile, you have nothing to worry about" Will hurries to reassure him as he suddenly hears a faint chuckle and turns his gaze back to Brown.

He has a crooked grin on his lips. "Dogs are not a problem, Mr. Graham" he replies and sighs, relaxing his back a little on the seat. "I love dogs, actually. I think they can be cute if the owner is nice."

"Really?" this actually surprises him a little, but Will immediately bites his lip, remembering the words of one of his classmates who once gave him an entire lecture on stereotypes. He hastens to smooth over his ignorance. "It's a good thing. They, um, just like me, are a bit

unsociable and… not used to visitors, but I don't think they'll cause any problems" he smiles softly at him, but Matthew only nods slightly, looking down at his feet. Will turns his attention to them too, realizing that the man was barefoot and there was mud and blood dripping off his feet onto the rug. Graham senses his discomfort, so he hurriedly shifts his attention, honestly not thinking it's something Brown should apologize for. At the same time he realized it was too soon to ask about everything that had happened, he needed to calm him down first, feed him, warm him, wash him, let him rest, make him feel safe. So he decided to stay at the safe topics. "I think I have eggs and milk in the fridge, and, ah, there's also probably plenty of fish in the freezer, I just went fishing on Sunday. I could make something with it" he wants to add that he's suggesting fish not because Matthew is a cat, but just because he really has nothing but fish in his fridge, but Brown doesn't let him bury himself any deeper.

"Sounds good..." he says softly, wrapping himself more tightly in Will's jacket. "You're very kind."

"It's nothing," Graham replies honestly, pulling up in front of the house.

He helps Matthew out of the car making sure he doesn't slip on the mud and gently leads him closer to the house, from which the barking of several dogs can already be heard. Will leaves Brown to wait on the porch for a bit and goes inside himself, quickly reassuring everyone to stay in their places as he leads the stranger into the house, giving him slippers right away - not really even to keep him from getting the floor dirty, but rather just to make sure he didn't feel awkward walking through his house. He clearly felt embarrassed and didn't want to make a mess in someone else's territory.

The dogs look at him curiously, heads tilted to the side, sniffing a little, and Will stands still, noticing that Brown is sniffing back, wagging his tail slightly. The gazing between Matthew and the pack ends after a moment, and Graham immediately takes the man to the bathroom, where the first aid kit was kept and where he could wash off the dirt and blood. He poured warm water into a basin where he usually washed small dogs, and Matthew sits down on the side of the tub and dips his feet in, grimacing in pain for a few moments. Will rolls up the sleeves of his shirt, sitting down on the floor in front of him with the first aid kit, and gently washes his feet. Brown recalls the gospel his mother used to read to him before bedtime when he was a child, and metaphorical images crash into his head like they did in those years. He looks at Will, feeling religious. A slave is not greater than his master, and a messenger is not greater than the one who sent him. He always liked this part.

Graham is focused and careful, first washing and then treating the small wounds on his feet, feeling somewhat relieved that he finds no traces of stuck glass or anything like that. He looks up, noticing that the jeans Matthew was wearing hardly belonged to him, it was as if he'd stolen them from someone; that couldn't hint at anything good. Will sighs softly, looking into his face after all, and then stands up, washing his hands quickly to now treat the scar that has caught his attention. Matthew bites his lip and hisses in pain, but tolerates whatever is being done to him. Finished with this one, Graham lowers his gaze to his torn clothes. "Let me help you get this off, okay?" he offers softly in a low voice, and Brown silently raises his arms up slightly so Will can pull the shirt off over his head. He takes a quick look over him, noticing the bruises and small wounds and a couple of tattoos decorating the rather fit body,

before looking at the crumpled t-shirt in his hands. The garment was hardly salvageable anymore, so the man doesn't take much care and just tosses it in the sink for now, for dealing with it later. He decides to take things slowly, so he keeps his jeans on for now, instead treating the wounds he sees at the moment.

He notices a lot of cuts on his arms, some of them were from the branches Brown was wading through, some were from falls, as he seems to have stumbled a few times. But what alarmed him most was what he saw when Matthew carefully turned sideways so that he could see his back: it bore the marks of blows from something like a whip or maybe some kind of belt, it was hard to tell, but the blows had clearly been hard, bloody, and in some places there were real scars. But it wasn't the worst thing, because beside them, he saw the hot branding done on top of one of his tattoos, recognizing it as the Verger family emblem. This causes him to freeze in complete silence, and he only comes to his senses when he hears the dogs whining outside the door, reflexively immediately quieting them with a whistle.

The man swallows, gingerly reaching out a hand to treat his wounded back, and Matthew flinches at almost every touch, biting his lip to keep from making any unnecessary sounds. Will decides to at least try to distract him. "What do your tattoos mean?"

He doesn't know how he should treat the burn from the branding, it seems to have been done some time ago, something that could say a lot about how long Matthew has been in the place he escaped from. He decides to just carefully dab it with the burn ointment, though he realizes that it's pretty useless; it just doesn't seem right to him not to do anything about it at all.

"It's a scarab. Or rather, it should be if you put the two halves together," Matthew replies and sighs, gathering his strength to endure a little more pain from feeling the touch on his scars. "A symbol of reincarnation and transformation for the ancient Egyptians. I was a pretentious douchebag when I was eighteen" he chuckles weakly and Will smiles back a little, acting more like a mirror.

He helps him take off his jeans and tosses them aside and cautiously examines his legs, noticing only bruises from repeated falls and a couple scratches. "Why is it cut in two?" Graham asks, treating one that appeared to be the deepest, located on the inside of his thigh. It seemed to have been done with a knife, probably just to scare him and cause some sort of reaction. It was getting heavier in his chest and Will couldn't stop thinking about the Verger branding.

"The division between my past and my future. What was before and after my mother's death" he replies simply, and then grins again, albeit a little bitterly. "I guess I may need to divide my life into before and after once again now. If it's really over" he sniffs his nose, but he doesn't cry, holding himself back, nor does he feel the strength to sob.

"It is over" Will says confidently, wanting to reassure him, to comfort him, to give him the confidence that all the nightmares are now gone. He doesn't even care if Mason or Margo are legally entitled to Matthew; this was all just too much, and he was ready to hide him in his place if necessary. He was beginning to realize that going to the police would be a bad idea, considering how much influence the Verger family had in the area. He could only trust those he knew personally, and there were very few of those people. Still, he had to figure out how

to help Brown. "You're safe here. I won't let them hurt you" he promises, looking him in the eye and seeing Matthew look at him as if he was about to cry from confusion at these words; Will only smiles softly at him in an attempt to be supportive, and stands up, carefully putting the first aid kit away. "Can you shower by yourself?" he asks, looking over his shoulder, and Brown nods uncertainly at first, but then does so more decisively. "Okay, but feel free to call me if you need anything. I'll be downstairs making dinner" he says and manages to notice a shadow of worry on the young man's face, immediately realizing the reason for it. "I think Max can stay by your side to make you feel safer. He's a good guard" Will smiles slightly and Matthew exhales, nodding at this offer.

Graham opens the bathroom door and beckons Max over, and he obeys his command, staying in place to fulfill his mission. Will himself turns to look at Brown to check him over once more and make sure he's going to be okay, and when he sees the barely perceptible smirk on his face and the calm look directed at Max, he exhales in relief and leaves to make dinner.

Left alone with the dog, Matthew gets up to turn on the warm water in the shower and stands under the stream that warms him, relaxing a little. He hasn't had this in a long time. He can feel the water stinging his wounds, hissing slightly in pain, but he tolerates it; it still doesn't hurt as much as it did a while ago. He looks around the shelves and sees the shampoo, deciding he can use it, and squeezes some into his palms, starting to rinse his hair thoroughly. They'd noticeably grown since the last time he'd gotten a haircut, and that was even a good thing - well, now. At least he looked better than he had right after it was done to him. He made sure of that when he looked at himself in the mirror after the shower, looking at his face (he supposed the scar on his chin would stay with him forever, like so many others) and his muscles, which were in somewhat worse shape than before his captivity, but still not completely gone. Even though he realized that he hadn't been disfigured solely so that he could continue to please Mason's eye, he couldn't help but acknowledge with a sense of triumph that it was his strength that had enabled him to get out and run so far to reach the track. Suck it, Verger.

He hastily dried himself off with a towel so he wouldn't drip onto the floor and glanced around for something to wear, finding a gray terrycloth robe that clearly belonged to Will. Matthew, realizing that there is nothing else in the bathroom but this and the ruined clothes that have clearly lost their ability to do their job after all this escape, puts the robe on, smiling in surprise when he realizes how soft and warm it is, and also - it smells like Will. He sniffs tentatively at the collar, frowning a little wistfully, and then decides that he likes this smell a lot. It was quite unlike anything he had smelled while on the farm. There was no smell of meat or blood or dirt or pigs, no scent of expensive wine or perfume or chocolate, the memory of which even now made him shudder and gag. He lowered his gaze to the pile of clothes in the sink and wondered if he should tell Will that not all the blood on it was his alone.

He himself was convinced that he had an excuse to kill those two men, since they had tried to kill him first, and had physically and mentally abused him for months before that. One he had beaten to death with a figurine he had stolen when he was brought in to entertain Mason once again. His plan had almost failed then when the man had noticed it was missing, but his sister had said she was the one who had broken it that morning and decided to clean up the pieces herself before anyone got cut.

Margo was a good one. Matthew would have been happy to help her in return, but didn't know how yet, and was quite content to just be able to escape alone at all. The clothes he'd taken off later from another of his guards he'd met along the way; he'd stained it in blood when he'd cut his throat open with the knife that had later fallen out of his hands while he'd been running in the woods. Now he was worried that they could tell from it which direction he was running in and where he came out on the highway. Logically they could figure out that he had been picked up by someone in a car, and it didn't look like there were many people living around here. Eventually they'll come up with Will. He is not safe in here.

He tries not to think about it and walks out of the bathroom, hearing his stomach rumble. He'd eaten early in the morning, and now it was late evening, and he felt terribly weak after his escape. He walks, accompanied by Max, down the stairs, peering cautiously into the kitchen, calming down when he sees Will cooking something in a pan. The man is surrounded by several dogs waiting for a treat, but the owner is stern and won't give them food until he sits down at the table himself. Matthew takes a sniff and feels his drool begin to flow at the smell of the food, and he can't contain himself and keep standing in the doorway, so he gives away his presence by coming closer, tail wagging interestedly.

Will looks over his shoulder and smiles a little, seeing Brown in his robe. "I'll give you my clothes after dinner" he says and nods at the table. "Sit down, it'll be ready soon" Graham checks the fish in the pan and turns off the stove, starting the last stage of dinner preparation, while Matthew obediently sits down in the seat offered to him, wrapping himself more tightly in his warm robe.

After a couple minutes, Will puts two plates of food and two cups of chamomile tea on the table, hoping it will help Brown relax a little more. He slices bread and cheese, making sandwiches because he's starting to think his guest must be really hungry after everything that's happened and would want to eat more than just his usual portion. It wasn't like he'd been starved, of course, but he still looked a little malnourished. Will takes the chocolate cookies out of the drawer and puts them on the table, noticing Matthew's tense look, but Brown looks back at his plate almost immediately, though he doesn't start to eat. Graham takes his fork and starts first, and only then does Matthew feel confident enough to begin his meal.

He eats rather quickly because of his hunger, but he does notice that Will is a very good cook. He tells him this out loud, stopping only for a few moments, and Graham smiles a little, feeling pleasantly shy. "My father taught me how to fish when I was just a kid. Around the same time I started learning how to cook different dishes with fish. It was our main source of food, especially when we lived on a boat" he tells, deciding to share something of his own before he starts asking about Matthew's experience. "It wasn't hard to hone the skill over the years" Will remarks with a smile.

"And how old are you?" Brown asks curiously, taking a large sip of tea.

"I'm thirty-three. And you?" he returns the question.

Matthew smirks slightly, cutting a piece of fish on his plate. "I'm twenty-four, Mr. Graham" the young man replies, and Will snorts, still smiling slightly (more because Matthew had the strength to be in a good mood after everything that had happened).

"Call me Will, please. It would be nice if at least someone called me that" he sighs, taking a sip of his tea.

"You don't usually get called by your first name?" Brown asks curiously, and Will shakes his head. "You mentioned you work for the FBI. Agent Graham, then?"

"I'm... not an agent, I, ah, teach at the academy," Graham awkwardly corrects, feeling a little bad now that it looks like he's already managed to lie to Matthew. "Used to be a policeman and wanted to become an agent, but... I turned out not to be quite qualified for the job" he smiles a little, rather mechanically, and catches the young man's interested look. Well, curiosity is better than distrust. "Turned out not to be ready to shoot a man."

Brown looks at him thoughtfully, having stopped mercilessly devouring everything from his plate. "That much against violence?" he clarifies, taking a sip of tea.

Will could have nodded and changed the subject. Still, he wanted to establish a line of trust with this guy, which meant he needed to be frank and reveal something about himself to him. "Um… not really. I empathize with people too much, most of the time. The gift and the curse. I looked at that killer and couldn't stop thinking about what he'd been through, couldn't stop feeling his pain, was unable to hurt him again, like others did. I knew I had to shoot him so he wouldn't kill the hostage. But the hostage was so much worse than the killer, and I just... it's like two voices in my head arguing in raised tones, and I tried to drown out their screams by plugging my ears and starting to sing some kind of a kid's song" he says, wrinkling his nose for a few moments, looking down at the table. "I didn't fire a shot. The hostage was killed. The killer was shot by my partner who came to the scene. That's how my police work ended. And I turned out to be too unstable for the FBI, didn't pass the tests."

He cautiously raises his gaze to Matthew to watch his reaction, but sees no fear or anything else remotely negative. Matthew seems to light up with something from within, like a match. Noticing Graham's questioning look, Brown smiles awkwardly and looks down at his plate again, finishing his dinner. "So you got fired because you're a good man?" he asks with a smirk.

Will arches his eyebrows slightly at that wording, but then just snorts with a smile. "I think every person has the right to look at it through the prism of their own personal experience and moral values" Graham says, and then, noticing that Matthew's plate is already empty, decides that it's okay to ask for at least a little bit of information now - just so that there will be a chance to come up with something overnight about what to do next. He clears his throat, trying to figure out how to start, but Brown suddenly stands up.

"I'll do the dishes" he says and smiles awkwardly, facing Will's confused look. "I don't like being useless" he explains and, receiving no objections, he puts all the dishes away in the sink, starting to wash it in silence.

Graham stares silently at his back, his tail visible under his robe, and then sighs, standing up and walking over to the liquor cabinet. "Want a whiskey?" he asks, showing the bottle. Matthew looks at it with interest, pondering, and then nods, and Will pours them quite a bit, just to relax a bit more. After everything that's happened, Brown's probably going to have trouble sleeping, and Graham really wants to help him at least like this.

Matthew finishes washing the dishes and wipes his hands on a towel while Will feeds the dogs, and then they sit down by the fireplace. Brown climbs onto the couch in his robe, hugging his legs, not wanting to change yet, feeling too comfortable, and Will decides not to rush him with it. Sitting down next to him, he hands the guy a glass of whiskey, and he smiles gratefully at him. Graham sighs heavily, still having trouble finding the words. "Matthew..." he begins, and then finally decides not to stall and ask it straight out. "Can you tell me what happened? I want to keep you safe, but for that I need a clear understanding of how you ended up... in this situation."

Brown swishes his tail, looking away, and silently takes a sip of alcohol. He wrinkles his nose, having already forgotten what whiskey tastes like, but immediately takes a second sip. "I've already thought about it. I don't think there's any option to really help me" he smiles nervously, glancing at Will. "You've seen the branding. You know who I belong to."

"You don't belong to anyone" Graham says, trying to maintain eye contact even though he's having a hard time doing so. "That branding is nothing more than an attempt to psychologically manipulate you. Did you sign a prenup?" he asks more cautiously.

"Mason isn't the kind of man who has to worry about paperwork, Will. With his money and connections he doesn't need to" Matthew wrinkles his nose, averting his gaze again, swinging his tail slightly in tension. "I tried calling the police from there. It didn't lead to anything good. So… no help there. And he'll almost certainly be looking for me now that I've escaped, because he takes the branding pretty seriously. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised to find out there's a chip embedded in me somewhere - I checked my body while I was in the shower, of course, and there aren't any surgical scars, but who knows?" he scratches himself behind his ear and sighs. "Either way, he'll find me. I left a mess during my escape. There aren't many houses around here in the neighborhood, and he'll probably come here, or rather, send someone here."

"I have six dogs that bark as soon as a stranger gets close to the house. I have a gun and I know how to use it, no matter what my previous boss says," Will lists calmly but firmly. "I have a legitimate right to defend my territory by any necessary means. And I’m sure I can think of something to find a way punish him, Matthew".

"Punish him?" Matthew asks, raising his eyebrows with a smile, and then laughs. "Will, you’re just a charming, naive, 33-year-old man. The only way to punish him is to kill him. And for all my incredible desire to do so, I know it’s impossible. He’s got some kind of Italian mob security, and I managed to kill only two of them, and only because of the surprise effect and the fact that they were distracted and one at a time. Will raises his eyebrows a little, although he does not express his attitude towards Matthew's words in any other way. Brown realizes what he said a little belatedly, and sighs, realizing that there is no turning back. "What? If I hadn't done that, I wouldn't be here now."

"Okay".

“They were terrible people, sadists, Will” for some reason he continues to justify himself a little nervously.

“I'm sure,” Will says, trying to calm him down, and before he can even think about it properly, he leans forward, placing his hand on Matthew's wrist, which is resting on the young man's knee. Brown first looks down at their hands, then back to Graham's face, exhaling to relax. “I don’t blame you, Matthew,” his man urges, trying to smile, as if apologizing in advance for his further words, realizing how difficult it could be to fulfill his request, but, given the circumstances, he was not sure that they had time wait until morning for Matthew to come to his senses and get ready for this talk. “But I would be very grateful if you would tell me everything from the beginning. Please".

Matthew looks into his blue eyes and slowly sighs as he begins his story.

Chapter 2

A few months ago.

The truth was, Matthew really needed this job.

His past hadn't been perfect. Years ago, his mother had died in a fire, and he had rushed into the burning house too late, failing to save her. He had been orphaned afterward, but he hadn't stayed in the orphanage for long; as a result of the trauma he had suffered, he began to experience a form of pyromania, tending to set things on fire so he could stare at the flames. Because of this, some people began to suspect that he was the one who had set the fire in the house, but that was not the case - not that anyone was willing to believe him, though. He was sent to a juvenile mental institution for treatment, and came out of it with a certificate of recovery at eighteen. He still enjoyed looking at the fire, but he tried to limit himself to burning trash outside of town, and didn't do it too often so as not to draw too much attention to himself. He couldn't get rid of it altogether. Looking at the fire, he always felt a strange, paradoxical calm, like he was standing close to home. The fire had taken away his dearest memories, and he'd decided to tame it so that it wouldn't happen again.

Despite his recovery, and having an official certificate to prove it, his past was still tainted. No one wanted to let an arsonist anywhere near their patients. No matter how much he lowered his expectations for the job, they still wouldn't hire him - some because of their prejudices and disrespect, some because of their fear of crazy people. As for the former, even though cat people went into the medical field quite often, some old-minded hospital heads weren't ready to accept the fact that they'd been allowed to work on par with regular humans for decades now. This pissed Matthew off, and every refusal was accompanied by a cigarette and the burning of a garbage can in one of the alleyways on the way to his small rented apartment, which he barely had enough money to pay for. The whole system seemed monstrously unfair to him, and injustice was always what he hated most.

The Verger Family Christian Summer Camp was a temporary option, but it offered a pretty good paycheck, and Brown desperately needed the money. If he wasn't hired, he'd have to give up his dream of tying his life to medicine and go serve coffee or be a night cashier at a gas station. He didn't want that. Not just because of some principles or something, it was that his mother was a nurse and he'd always wanted to be like her, wanted her to be proud of him, knowing he was helping people. Giving that up was too much for him, even after his rebirth after being discharged from the hospital. This job was his last chance, and he didn't want to miss it.

He did his best to show up for the interview in the best possible way. After a rather long wait in the stately, palace-like hallway, he was let into the office of Margot Verger, a rather elegant young woman with round eyes that looked as if they were filled with fear. The rest of her face was perfectly calm and her movements were graceful. She'd read his resume before she'd even let him in here, which meant she wasn't uncomfortable with the arsonist's past - Matthew had allowed himself a little hope and was ready to show his best self, smiling a little nervously. However, when she raised her eyes of a frightened deer at him, she stiffened for

just a few moments and Brown almost groaned in annoyance - his ears were messing things up again! He couldn't believe that a young woman like Margot could turn him down for a job because of this, falling for some stereotype. He tried not to show it and kept smiling, and after clearing his throat with a cough, he started talking, telling her about how much he loves children, and how he had interned in the pediatric department of a hospital some time ago. It wasn't a lie, he had always had a soft spot for children, but in that hospital no one had let him near them, giving him small errands and making him scrub the floors. He deliberately chose not to specify that.

Miss Verger was looking at him with uncertainty and slight concern, and it was hard for him to understand the reason for it. When she spoke, her voice seemed thoughtful to Matthew, as if she were balancing on the edge of a choice. "Mr. Brown, I'm not sure if this job would be good for you," she said oddly then, and he fell a little awkwardly silent, and then chuckled, not quite understanding such wording.

"Well, I'm sure I'll be just good enough for this job" he decided to reply confidently, flashing a smile. As soon as Matthew noticed that she was about to say something else, he decided to get ahead of her, realizing that his last chance was to literally beg and hope that this cold queen with the doll face and frightened eyes would take heart in his situation and at least give him a chance. "Look, I realize you're distrustful of job candidates like me, but I really need this, I really do! I can't find a job for who knows how long, at least give me a chance, I'm begging you! I've been excellent in my studies, I've done well in my internship at the hospital, I'm great with kids - you can give me a probationary period and I promise I won't disappoint you! Please understand, Ms. Verger, I really need this job. Please, at least give me a chance" he said, knowing how to be pathetic when it was necessary.

She bit her lip, looking at him in tense silence, clearly not expecting such fervor, then opened her laptop, looking through something in it, and, with a sigh, agreed to take him on for a month, warning him that he would need to leave by July. Matthew was over the moon, not knowing that Margo had set such a condition because she knew that on the first of July her brother would return to the farm and camp from his long trip, once again becoming a danger to all visitors and camp staff. Matthew was too unusual and charming to be left out of the danger zone. She couldn't help but realize that.

Brown loved working as a nurse at the camp. He had a way with children, easily treating their abrasions and bruises from falling off horses (the most common reason children came to the medical center), and with a hidden irony talking about the dangers of violence to the boys who came to him after another fight they started. The first half of the month was almost perfect; he nearly died of a heart attack only once, when some teenagers burst in screaming that their friend had fallen off a horse and was not breathing (it turned out not to be that serious, but everyone got really scared then anyway). Everything else was fine and quiet, he talked to the kids a lot and sometimes narrated gospel stories that his mom loved, interacted well enough with the other staff, especially the forty-year-old cook Eric, who often gave him an extra portion of dessert out of his love for cats. Eric was one of those people whose stereotypical thinking, for some reason, was not annoying, but even endearing, and Matthew could only smile charmingly back at him when he received another fish-shaped pastry. He glanced up to thank him, but saw his tense gaze directed toward the gate. Without explaining anything, the man ran off immediately as Brown turned to see what had alarmed him.

Matthew saw only a black limousine pulling into the camp grounds, and frowned slightly as he turned back to realize that Eric had shamefully run off somewhere. His wits told him that it must be someone in charge, and hardly Margo, because they didn't fear the girl, even liked her, though they didn't show it too openly, preferring for some reason a cold respect. Matthew got a strange feeling of being in some kind of Italian mafia, and he found it funny.

He headed towards his office, realizing that the lunch break was coming to an end. His assistant, Kaitlyn, one of the camp guests from the older group who dreamed of becoming a doctor, was still there and cheerfully greeted him when he came in. She was sitting at her textbooks as usual, so he called her a nerd and patted her hair, putting the cup of coffee on his desk and sitting back down. He was going to quietly read a book borrowed from the library as a leisure activity until another hyperactive kid bruised his knee, but after a couple minutes one of the boys knocked on his door and told him that there had been an accident in the stables. Leaving Kaitlyn here alone again, Matthew rushed with his first aid kit to the stables where he immediately heard quiet crying and someone's voice.

"That's it, boy, cry. Tears are good; they help with the pain, don't they? Mommy must have told you about it, it's become trendy to talk about those things in the last few years..." he heard, taking a quick step closer, and a stranger in a light classic suit and with disheveled blonde hair raises his head, looking at him through the thin panes of his glasses. His pupils dilate as their gazes collide, but Matthew pays it no mind, immediately turning his full attention to the child, only excusing himself softly for the man to move away. "Uh-oh. Who do we have here? The new nurse? So you're the one my dear Margo hired?" the man asks.

Brown examines the child quickly, noticing that he looks fine, except that a lump was starting to grow on his forehead. He sighs, pulling a cooling ointment out of his bag, throwing another quick glance at the man still standing nearby, scrutinizing him from top to bottom. "Yes. You're Mr. Verger, I presume? What happened here?" he asks, and then soothingly strokes the boy's head and whispers something to him softly, calling his name as if lulling him to sleep.

"Ah, it's nothing serious sweetie, he was just running and bumped into the stable door" Mason replies and Matthew, finished with the boy's forehead, sighs and wraps his arms around him, taking him, purring softly to soothe him. Standing up, he looks over at Verger, who smirks, squinting at him with interest. Brown didn't need to be a psychic or a detective to realize that the man was a bad person, but at that moment he thought he was bad in the same sense that people who came from the families of yesterday's slave owners, racists, sexists, homophobes, and catphobes usually were. Matthew inwardly grinned grimly, wondering how soon he would hear a slur like "pussy" from him, but outwardly he remained unconcerned and only continued to soothe the quietly whimpering child. "What's your name, honey?"

Like if I tell you my name you'll start calling me by it, Matthew thought irritably. "I'm nurse Brown. Now if you'll excuse me, I have to take him to the nurse's station and get back to my workplace" he says, trying not to sound annoyed, and walks out of the stable away from the annoying man, sincerely hoping they won't see each other again from now on.

He was, of course, terribly naive. That very evening, sitting in his small private room reading a book, he had heard a brisk knock on the door, that opened before he could even open his mouth, which meant that the visitor had no real respect for his personal space or for the rules of etiquette in principle, but simply wanted to make a noisy appearance. Based on that, he wasn't surprised to see Mason, and swished his tail in irritation, frowning slightly. He immediately tries to disguise it, though, reminding himself that he doesn't want to lose his job and naively believing that this man can be negotiated with. He feigns a slightly nervous smile as he closes the book. "Mr. Verger? What can I do for you?"

"Hi, Matthew!" Mason smiles, unceremoniously walking through and closing the door behind him, looking at the young man. He's still wearing the same suit and black gloves, and he adjusts his glasses. Being addressed by name doesn't surprise Brown, despite the fact that he didn't mention it to this man; it wasn't like it was hard to find that information after all, especially considering this is literally the owner of everything the Verger family has. "Tell me sweetie, do you like working here?"

I like working here, but I don't like where it's going, Matthew thinks. "I do like it. I'm good with kids" he decides to say.

Mason smirks. "Yeah, I'm good with kids too" he says in a weird and slightly disturbing way, but Matthew just keeps looking at Verger, standing by his desk. "Well, I'm glad you like it here. You're here for the whole summer, right?"

"No, I was told I am here until July," Brown replies.

"Oh, that's a shame!" Mason exclaims a little emotionally and theatrically. "Well, how fortunate in that case that I was able to return from my trip early and catch you here, kitten, right?"

Bastard. Matthew sighed, averting his gaze and looking away, unable to contain his displeasure at what was happening. "Mr. Verger, I would like to point out that this is ignorant and rude. I introduced myself as nurse Brown, and I would prefer to be called that. I didn't go to college for nothing" he returns his bold and calm gaze to his eyes, and sees the second surprise followed by a slight laugh, and smiles back tensely.

"Adorable! No, really, adorable," Mason says through his laughter, and then slips his hand into a pocket, looking for something there. "Tell me, nurse Matthew... would you like some chocolate?"

Matthew remembered from that terrible fire that his first reaction to a nightmare was to freeze like a deer in the headlights and do nothing until it was too late. He sat on the cold floor of his room, hugging his knees, staring dully at the candy bar he'd discarded from the table and dropped not far from his bed. His whole body was shaking, and he could feel the nausea coming up his throat and the disgusting taste of chocolate on his tongue - Mason had pushed one of the pieces right into his mouth, pressing his jaw in some places for him to open it. He wanted to get rid of the aftertaste, the phantom sensation of someone else's hands on his body, wanted to peel off his skin, burn himself alive to rest in the warmth of the flames, but

he'd been just sitting on the floor, unmoving, for an hour since Verger had left the room. Only an actual bout of nausea brings him out of this state, and he runs off to his bathroom, disposing of all his dinner and changing the flavor of chocolate to something equally disgusting.

Only then does he stand up from the floor and look at himself in the mirror and feel depersonalized by what is happening, as if he doesn't understand the limits of his body and is unable to realize himself as the person looking back at him from the reflection. He touches his cheek, then presses his fingers into his hair until it hurts, and grimaces, leaning powerlessly against the sink, gripping the edges of it with his hands. He takes a few short inhales and exhales, then turns the water on sharply and rinses his face as if trying to bring himself to his senses. He couldn't believe that this man had a bunch of children under his control and responsibility at arm's length.

He shudders with his whole body as he goes under the hot shower that is close in temperature to leaving some burns on him. He feels tears on his cheeks, and hastily washes them away, remembering how Verger held a small napkin up to his eye to absorb the salty moisture, chuckling hoarsely under his ear just before he left. Sick bastard. Images of varying degrees of brutality flashed through Matthew's mind with fantasies of how he could get revenge on the man for everything he'd done.

He didn't sleep that night, and in the morning he came into his office, darker than an ocean, trying to simply dodge the questions of a slightly agitated Kaitlyn. Eric, however, seeing him like that in the hallway, somehow didn't even ask a question, just looked at him and pursed his lips. Matthew began to put together an ugly puzzle in his head, one that was still missing too many pieces at that moment; it was only when they brought him a crying boy after lunch, hysterical and unable to say a word, that he realized with horror what was going on in that hellish place. He left the boy with Kaitlyn and headed for Margo's office, filled with determination.

He didn't know exactly what he'd hoped for when he'd burst into her office uninvited and started talking emotionally about what her brother was doing to the kids at the camp. But he couldn't afford to keep quiet, his emotions were boiling inside him, and he felt like he was going to explode or self-ignite if he kept it in. His hands were shaking as he fell silent after his fiery speech, waiting for Ms. Verger's reaction.

The young woman looked at him anxiously, her lips pressed together, but nothing betrayed her concern and fear except her eyes.

She holds eye contact for a couple extra moments and then sighs quietly and lowers her head, looking at her hands before staring at Matthew again. "Did you accept or refuse?" she asks calmly.

"What?"

A moment of silence and a sigh. "When my brother offered you chocolate," Margot explains and tilts her head to the side, looking at Matthew, darkening before her eyes, "did you accept or refuse?"

Brown froze as he looked at her, feeling goosebumps of terror run across his skin. He couldn't bring himself to utter a word, instead sinking into the chair across from the girl and frowning slightly, feeling the drops of tears so needlessly begging to come to his eyes. He holds them back, not wanting to look pathetic right now. "Refused," he answers quietly.

Ms. Verger nods, realizing something for herself. "Don't blame yourself for making the wrong choice, Mr. Brown. There is no right choice in this situation, believe me. He offers the illusion of a choice that impacts almost nothing, just for his amusement. Sometimes he may offer chocolate and then do nothing. But more often he does" her face reflects no emotion, and only in her eyes he sees the same glazed fear. He wonders if his eyes look the same now.

He is silent for about a minute and then leans forward in his chair, looking the girl in the face. "We must report this to the police" he says heartfelt a little louder than a whisper.

Margot feigns a smile. "Don't be silly. Look around, use your brain. The police lick his boots and come to his door to bow to him. Any call... It'll only make things worse" she shakes her head with a frozen grin, like a reflection in a crooked mirror.

Matthew frowns. He could usually take and endure a lot, could understand violence, but Mason Verger was a crazy bastard, a fucking devil who only belonged in hell suffering in a boiling bloody river. Until this day, Brown had naively thought such men were heroes' fiction, exaggeration, hyperbole, but he'd been wrong. He'd been so damn wrong. And now he is trying to quickly figure out what to do next, how to get out of the situation in which he found himself. The word "murder" lights up in his head, and he feels a shiver run through his body. It would be a risk he was willing to take nonetheless. All he needed was a plan - and probably accomplices. He looks at Margo again, taking his palms away from his face, and swallows, gathering his thoughts. " I'm not going to just get over it and forgive him. Don't you want to end this? Get revenge on him?"

The girl sighs quietly, getting up from her seat and walking over to a small table in the corner, pouring alcohol into her glass. "Revenge is a dish best served cold, Mr. Brown. If you allow yourself to be subjected to the heat of the moment, nothing good ever comes of it."

"My revenge will not be something cold, I will burn him" Matthew says a little sharply.

She hums with a subtle hint of amusement. "Fire is a dangerous weapon, Mr. Brown. It can turn against the one who ignited it or burn everything around, including what you hold dear."

"I have nothing to fear, Ms. Verger, I don't have anything I care about and I bet I can handle the burns" Matthew wrinkles his nose and only then looks at the girl with the glass of bourbon in her hands. He frowns, looking into her calm face. "Ah. So this isn't about me, it's about you. You're afraid of losing everything" he realizes. "What, more than you're afraid of him? And what, are you going to try and stop me when I want to carry out this execution?"

"Stop you? No," she smiles weakly and takes a sip before putting the glass back down and walking to the table. "It's pointless, you were raised on religious books and have a penchant for righteous violence, and you have been abused. Still, I would advise you to put this off until better times, so that there is at least one chance of success. For now you should get out

of here as soon as possible and forget about everything for a while" she sits down at her desk and picks up the phone. "I'll transfer your paycheck and call a cab."

Matthew presses his lips together, feeling anger inside him at the incomprehension of how such injustice could be allowed to happen for so long. He is driven by rage as he rises from his seat and heads away from the office, clenching the hands in the pockets of his white coat into fists. Unfair, unfair, unfair - no, the quintessence of injustice contained in one man! Brown can't stop imagining Mason's body burning, tied to a pole while chocolate melts in his mouth from the high heat. Violent urges reappear in his head, though they haven't been there since the asylum, when he dreamed of killing his psychiatrist who tried to prove to him that he was responsible for his mother's death. Still, he pressed his lips together and turned in the right direction and headed for his room, about to pack his things and leave to better think out a plan. If revenge is a dish to be served cold, his initial anger clearly needs time to cool down. He's a smart boy, after all.

"Kitty!" a cheerful voice calls out to him from behind, causing him to freeze in startled awe without even turning around. Matthew holds his breath and looks around, trying to do so discreetly. Mason comes closer and closer, and his panic begins to rise with the sound of each step he takes. "How lucky I am to meet you here! I was just looking for you kitten, I wanted to make you a perfectly wonderful proposal!" he steps around him to face him, and Brown holds back, keeping his expression neutral, suspecting that his eyes are giving him away now anyway. He wants to find a mirror and see if there's any damn fear in them.

"Are you going to offer me your chocolate again?" he asks cheekily, before he can bite his tongue.

He sees Mason first raise his eyebrows in surprise and then blur into a disgusted grin. "How cheeky, just like a puss in boots! Oh, I'd love to see you in nothing but boots - I'll have to remember that thought, it might come in handy later" his confidence in his own impunity drives Matthew into a rage, shutting down any fuses that might let him know it's time to quietly get out of here as soon as possible before the spider weaves its strong web around him.

He takes a step forward, glaring at him menacingly like a hawk at an opponent. "If you think you have the right to say and do anything you want simply because of your wealth and connections, and that no one will ever make you pay for it, you are sorely mistaken, Mr. Verger," Matthew almost hisses, fire blazing in his eyes. "I have no intention of putting up with all this. If you touch me one more time..."

"What, are you going to burn me like your mommy?" Mason asks nastily with a mocking grin, and Brown flames with anger. His eyes round, and he grabs Verger sharply by the collar of his jacket and shoves him against the wall before bringing his fist up to punch him in the nose, but then he himself is grabbed from behind by his white medical robe, dragging away from the man, and he only has time to hiss, exposing sharpened fangs, when someone many times stronger than him throws him face-first into the floor. "Be careful with him, Pedro! Don't ruin his pretty face!" Matthew hears through the ringing in his ears from the blow as he tries to get up with the help of his arms. "It would be a shame to waste it like this" is the last thing he hears before another blow leaves him unconscious.

He tried to kill him twice more in the next couple months, but each time it ended in predictable failure and punishment - after the second attempt, Mason's men left a scorched brand on his back, and this was another time the fire betrayed Matthew. He just wished the fire would just consume him already. He couldn't stop thinking about that fire in his house he would've been better off staying in, better off not letting the firemen pull himself out. He had to let the fire defeat him. Now it seemed to be too late for that.

Over time, Brown learned not to cry out in pain, so as not to give Verger unnecessary pleasure. It amused him at first, but after a couple of days he became angry, and then the whip marks began to appear on Matthew's back. He tried to hold on even then, transforming pain into anger, and anger into a plan.

With the end of summer, the kids had left camp and he and Margo were pretty much the only ones he could use for his fun. Every extra day spent in a small, cold room under a thin blanket soaked with his own blood meant to Matthew that a girl was suffering instead of him, and it didn't make his situation one bit better. He didn't feel sympathy for her, but he clearly felt the injustice, and it made him furious.

One time he'd even managed to sneak a phone at one of the parties while Mason was distracted - he'd snatched it from one of the guests and locked himself in the restroom, dialing the police in a desperate effort to end the whole thing, but it had gone nowhere good. That night Verger must have been told about the call by his friends from the police and decided to teach his captive a lesson by putting on a show for him. For a full five minutes Matthew had been convinced that the police who had opened his cell door and escorted him through the corridors of the manor had really come to rescue him, but in the end he had simply been led back to Mason, and a new punishment had followed.

Unfair. Unfair. The word was burned into the walls of Brown's mind, and the only image that could comfort him in the night afterward was of Verger burning alive at the stake.

He hadn't hoped for much when he stealthily snatched the figurine that lately had been hidden beneath his robe, the one that was small and sharp at the end, slightly weighted. If it hadn't been for Margo's help in taking the blame, he wouldn't have succeeded, but the girl had given him a chance, and he was grateful to her, though he was sure until the very last that Mason didn't believe her and that at any moment he would be captured and taken back for punishment. He thought about it as he bludgeoned the guard with the figurine and slit the throat of the other with the knife, and it wasn't until he was running through the woods toward the track, falling, stumbling over rocks and sharp branches, and getting up again, afraid to look back that he had any real hope.

He knew that by the time he got to the side of the road, his disappearance would surely have been noticed, but he stopped anyway because he just couldn't run any further.

He now realized how stupid that had been, and if it hadn't been for Will, he would have just been caught and dragged back in the next couple of minutes already. He wondered if the rustling in the bushes was really just him, or if there was someone there who had decided to follow him without taking away his hope of being rescued right away, like with the police last time. The thought makes him shiver, and he hugs his knees tighter, lowering his gaze to the

fireplace, quieting down, letting the silence cover him and Graham with a note of fear and tension.

Will empathizes with him, but also senses that Matthew doesn't need this for now. All this poor guy needs in this very moment is shelter, safety, he needs time to recover and finally come to his senses. And that's exactly what Will should be giving him right now.

Graham sighs and stands up to put the glasses away on the table. "You need a good night's rest. Come on, you'll sleep in the bedroom tonight" he beckons him to follow, and Brown opens his mouth a little awkwardly to object, but then decides not to and only silently follows Will to the second floor. It turns out to be a small room with the windows open for ventilation, and Graham closes them and then looking just as focused pulls out some clothes from the dresser - a white T-shirt and gray pajama pants that he only wore in the winter, when it was especially cold. After thinking for a moment, he also pulls out clean socks so Matthew's feet won't freeze while he sleeps, and places all this on the made up bed. "Well, I guess that's it. I'll leave the door open and be in the living room if you need anything" he tries to smile a little, still feeling the strain of other person's worries on him, and takes a step towards leaving the room.

"No!" Matthew's voice comes out with a slight note of panic, and Will freezes in confusion, looking at the younger man. Brown wraps his arms around himself, clutching the robe he's wearing with his fingers, and looks up at him with frightened eyes before becoming embarrassed by his own emotions and looking away, tucking his ears back against his head. "I mean... I don't think... I..." he licks his parched lips and tries to take a calm breath. "Can you stay?" he finally asks with hope and looks into his blue eyes again, and Will is lost, blinking several times. He slowly realizes what Matthew means and feels odd, but he can still understand his fear. He trusts him and wants to be around him because it's safer. It's okay, and after letting that thought run through his head, Graham agrees after all, nodding, immediately hearing Brown's relieved exhale and seeing unbidden smile.

"But first I have a couple of things to do" Will says. "I'll be back in ten minutes. I can get Max to stay with you," and with a nod, Graham whistles to the dog and he obediently comes running, bringing Buster with him. Will gives them a little smile and commands "guard", and, giving another glance to Brown, goes downstairs to put out the fireplace and clean the kitchen, then takes a shower and changes clothes. He glances at Matthew's torn bloody t-shirt, and after a moment's thought, decides to put it all away in a separate bag to burn tomorrow. He could do it now, but decides it would be better if Brown did it.

When he returns to the bedroom, Matthew is already in his clothes standing by the window, peering cautiously out onto the road. When he hears footsteps, he turns around sharply, but when he sees Will, he calms down, smiling a little. "Do you usually sleep with the dogs?" he asks, moving away from the window closer to the bed.

Graham shrugs somewhat awkwardly, sighing. "No, I... don't let them on the bed usually, but sometimes they lie on the cots next to me" he admits, approaching the bed too, but from the other side.

Matthew grabs the edge of the blanket and climbs into bed, covering himself from the cold with it, laying down facing Will, also sinking down next to him. "If you don't like fur on your

bedding, you should have thought of that earlier" he remarks, rubbing the back of his head and ears on the pillow, and Graham smiles softly, looking up at him.

"I think l'll get over it" he replies, hearing Max get comfortable on the cot at Matthew's side. He knows he can trust his dogs, and it allows him to relax a little. He keeps his eyes open, however, continuing to look at Brown because the young man kept looking at him. He feels his slight fear and understands it. "They may not know you're here. The rain may have washed away many of your footprints. Or they might think you were taken the other way, into town. It might take them a while to find you" he says softly, trying to sound soothing.

Matthew sighs. "We might have a couple days. If I stay away from the windows and outdoors."

"We could try changing your appearance a little. Dye your hair or something..."

"Mr. Graham, in case you haven't noticed, I have a couple of distinguishing features that I can't get rid of," Brown jokingly remarks, and Will sighs.

"You can hide it under your clothes, can't you? I have a long coat. It's old, but it's clean, and you could hide your tail under it, I think" he ponders aloud. "You could wear a hooded sweatshirt."

"And then what's next? Just take the bus on a long trip to a neighboring state?" Matthew asks.

"No, no," Will replies too quickly, putting himself in a slight state of confusion and raising his eyebrows, averting his gaze. He tries to analyze this reaction. He doesn't want Brown to go, doesn't want to leave him, he wants to help, to be there for him. Even though he's in obvious danger being in such close proximity to the farm... though maybe that's the point? Who in their right mind would seriously think a fugitive would hide so close for longer than one night, especially in a house with a bunch of dogs and an unsociable professor? There may well have been some logic to it. He finally looks again into the Brown's face, seeing that he waits for his answer. "You can stay here until it gets safer. Or until we come up with something to deal with all of this."

Will gazes cautiously into Matthew's face, trying to understand his reaction, and after a few moments he notices a slight grin on his face. "Just curious, were all your dogs strays you picked up off the street?" he asks suddenly, and Graham raises his eyebrows and then snorts, turning his gaze to the ceiling.

"No," he answers evasively and then still sighs, "one I rescued while on the force so she wouldn't have to end up in a dog shelter" Will still admits, and Matthew chuckles softly. Graham doesn't hold back and looks at him again, catching a glimpse of the dimples in his cheeks as he smiles and the light teeth with a pair of slightly sharp fangs. It's as if a heavy weight is lifted from his shoulders by the realization that Brown, after all that has happened, is not completely broken, like so many victims of violence he's seen during the time he was on the force.

Though it could be a sign of something bad. After all, if there's no marks here, they must be somewhere else. Sort of like how he'd seen only small cuts and bruises on the front of his chest, and only when he turned his back to him could he see the real nightmare.

"I guess you could call it one of my bad habits" he still jokes and Matthew smiles again.

"Really? What other bad habits do you have? Saving kittens from trees?" he snorts and lightly moves closer to the man on the bed. "Making birdhouses for the little baby birds? Freeing animals from traps?"

"Does it count as a habit if I've done it, like, just once or twice?" Graham asks, and Brown laughs. Will mindlessly raises his hand, allowing the obviously hinting Matthew to move even closer and put his arm around him, feeling his nose nuzzle into his side. It feels so right now that he doesn't let himself think about it, just starting to stroke him gently through his hair and neck. It feels even more right when he starts to hear a loud purr a couple minutes later, causing him to smile a little, and he just continues to stroke the young man's hair as he slowly falls asleep right in his arms.

Chapter 3

Matthew slept peacefully and without nightmares for the first time in months. He was surrounded by the warmth coming from the man's body beside him, his nose was against his shoulder, breathing his scent and all too quickly becoming addicted to it. That scent began to be tightly associated with safety, protection, comfort. Brown hadn't felt anything like this since his mother had died. It was unusual to come back to it again.

When Will tries to move with the intention of getting out of bed, Matthew clutches his side with his hand and begins to purr louder, not wanting to let the man go from himself, and the man frowns somewhat confused before he exhales and drops his palm into his hair, stroking it gently. "The dogs are going to start worrying and barking soon. We need to feed and walk them" he tries to explain, but Brown selfishly continues to snuggle up to him and Will feels the ache in his heart at the fact that he really does need to get up nonetheless. "Matthew, please," he sighs, "you can stay in bed, but I need to devote some time to the dogs and make us breakfast. Aren't you hungry?" he hears a disgruntled "mmm" and feels Brown relax his hand after all, allowing him to leave the bed, and Will smiles, rewarding him for it with a light scratch behind his ear before getting up.

He puts on his slippers and walks off to the bathroom, yawning, while Matthew stares after him sleepily, hugging his pillow. Graham continues with the routine of getting dressed and letting the pack outside. It is only as he stands on the porch and watches the dogs that he begins to reflect on all that has happened, on the man in his bed and his fate, and on the fact that it now looks like they will be living together for a while. Yesterday it had been easy to suggest it, but now Will was beginning to feel certain awkwardness. Matthew isn't a stray dog to just adopt him, he's a human being - albeit one with different peculiarities, some of which he'd tried to brazenly use this morning to keep him in bed. Graham sighs heavily, burying his fingers in his curly hair. The most proper thing to do would have been to report him to the police, or even the FBI, so that Matthew could be given a defense and Mason could be held accountable for everything he'd done and probably continued to do. But he couldn't hand Brown over to the police in a way that wouldn't make him worry later that they'd just taken him back to the mansion to his patron. But what to do then? Just go with the flow until Verger's men come knocking on his door?

Well. Sounds like a plan.

A shitty one, but it's the only one he's got so far.

He lets the dogs back into the house and follows, walking into the kitchen, finding Matthew there to his surprise, wearing his robe again and, yawning, making coffee. His ears twitch in the direction of his footsteps, but he doesn't turn around himself. Will still realizes that his presence has already been detected, so he doesn’t waste time to stare and just sighs and steps closer. "First stray I picked up that makes my coffee. Buster should probably learn something from you" he jokes ineptly, immediately mentally berating himself for such a comparison. He doesn’t want Matthew to start thinking he doesn’t see him as a human being.

Brown calmly pours coffee into two mugs. "I can also make a pretty good pasta," he replies and hands Will his mug.

Graham takes it. "Thanks" he says and quickly adds, somewhat awkwardly, "you didn't have to. And you don't have to... try to be helpful at all, Matthew, you know?"

The man shrugs uncertainly, wiping the table where he's spilled some coffee on. "I know, but… I mean... you're saving my life by risking your safety, man, just let me make you some coffee" he looks at him with a smirk, deciding to turn it into a joke, and Will begins to realize that this is how he's trained himself to handle stress, as if he grew up on Harry Potter and transferred the boggart metaphor to his own life, using Remus Lupin's method of preserving his own psyche. The effectiveness in the long run was questionable, of course, but it was better than stupor, so Graham figured it was something he could live with.

"Just don't overwork yourself," he says nonetheless, sitting down at the table. "You could just sleep some more, or read a book or something" he waves his hand vaguely, not knowing how to put his thoughts into words in a way that wouldn't put pressure on Matthew's sore spots.

The young man sits down quietly across from him, sipping his coffee. "Or maybe I could try to get to know you better," he says, and Will looks up at him. Brown shrugs. "I mean, I can certainly tell a lot about you based just on your house alone, uh, but not everything. You said you teach at the academy?"

Graham realizes that's honest, and that it's perfectly normal of Matthew to try to find out more about someone he's allowed himself to confide in, but telling about himself hasn't always been particularly easy for him. He sighs and reaches up to the bridge of his nose as if he wants to correct his glasses, but remembers he's not wearing them; hiding won't work. "I teach psychoanalysis. I go fishing. Sometimes fix boat engines. My father taught me," he explains, answering an unspoken question, and Matthew nods.

His eyebrows frown slightly. "What was he like?" Brown asks suddenly, and Will is even lost at such a question for a couple moments before he thinks about the answer and shrugs.

"Good. He tried his best" he finally finds the appropriate wording. "I never knew my mother, and he died when I was a young man. Now it's just me and the dogs here" Graham smiles a little, but is confronted with a thoughtful look from Matthew, who squints slightly, watching him with interest. He can't figure out what's going on in that head right now, so he looks away, changing the subject. "What do you want for breakfast?"

Brown doesn't have time to answer because they are interrupted by the sudden barking of the dogs and their shared restlessness, and Matthew immediately looks fearfully toward the front door, tucking his ears back against his head and clutching the mug in his hands. Will stares warily in the same direction for a couple of moments and then, without saying anything, walks over to the window to look out and see who's pulling up to the house. He exhales when it turns out to be the familiar yellow car of a girl who lives twenty minutes away.

"It's okay" he hurries to reassure Brown, stepping away from the window and approaching him, pale and frozen with shock. He gently touches his shoulder and squeezes it to ground him a little. "I forgot I'd agreed to fix the boat engine this weekend for a lady I know who

looks after the dogs when I'm away" Graham explains, burying his fingers in Matthew's hair, stroking between his ears and feeling him relax, waving his tail gently. "You can go up to the bedroom if you're feeling worried. But I don't think she'll go inside" he says softly.

Matthew nods awkwardly and then finishes his coffee in a gulp and stands up to leave, quickening his step when he hears a knock on the door. Will sighs softly as he glances after him, then goes to deal with his guest. Brown locks himself in the bedroom in the meantime, peering cautiously out the window so he can't be seen, and watches Graham follow the blond girl to her car, open the trunk, and carry what appears to be a boat engine somewhere toward the porch. She says something to him, but to hear her voice he has to open the window, and he's not that brave. Instead, he decides to close the curtains and look around inside the room, something he didn't have time to do yesterday. He opens the drawers curiously, peering inside, seeing perfectly evenly folded underwear and matching t-shirts and a bunch of plaid shirts hanging in the closet. He finds them cute, but decides not to stay in one place for too long, starting to quietly explore everything else around him. He finds a box under the bed and, after listening to the noises in the house and realizing Will is still outside, he decides to open it cautiously and peek inside. There he finds several photos, mostly of a grown man, sometimes with a child or teenager by his side, and it's in his features that Matthew can easily recognize Graham. He's always been adorably curly-haired. That makes Brown smile a little, and he continues to explore the contents of the box, eventually coming across an envelope with some kind of letter, but he decides not to read it, thinking it's too much for his curious face to pry into. He finds a couple other small items at the bottom, like something he identifies as a fishing lure that was many years old, and an even older-looking hair band. He looks at it thoughtfully, and he has a hunch that it might have been left by his mother, some small item left behind in a hurry and too insignificant to go back for. Matthew closes the box pensively, tucking it back under the bed, wondering if he and Will had more in common than it might seem. The mirrored scars. He didn't remember his father and knew nothing about him, except that he had been addicted to the bottle and had decided on his own to leave him and his mother, leaving a couple dollars on the table before disappearing forever. All those dollar bills were in a bible and all burned down along with the house. He doesn't have his box of memories left. All he has are recollections, but his memory is termite-eaten wood. He sighs as he gets into bed, wrapping himself in Will's robe as if it were a warm blanket, falling into a light slumber.

Will puts the engine away for later, to deal with it after breakfast, and, as the girl leaves, returns to the house, calling out to Matthew but getting no response. He goes upstairs, opening the bedroom door ajar, and sees Brown curled up on the bed, sleeping peacefully, only twitching his ears slightly. He smiles a little as he stares at this for a while, feeling strange warmth inside, and thinks that maybe the idea of getting a cat someday wasn't so crazy after all. Though, it would be hard to find one that would get along with all of his dogs like Matthew. Will sighs slightly as he leaves to go downstairs, deciding not to wake Matthew and make a proper breakfast for them himself.

Brown comes down when he seemingly smells the food being cooked, and Graham, turning around at the sound of his footsteps, can't help but smile again, though he still feels certain strangeness from what's happening. In the end he decides that he's doing the right thing, and that Matthew is far from the worst possible option for someone he could have picked up on

the side of the road at ten pm. He was harmless (despite having killed two people, Will reminds himself) and, arguably, cute.

It was still painful for him to walk because of the wounds on his feet, so he wrinkled a little with every step and only exhaled with relief when he sat down in his chair, yawning sweetly after his nap.

"I think it would be a good idea to burn your clothes. It could be used for evidence, of course, but since the justice system isn't on our side right now, it's best to get rid of it after all" he says, putting the food on plates.

Matthew starts to wag his tail slightly after the word 'burn'. He nods, slowly waking up completely. "That would be cool. I haven't burned anything in a while" he props his chin up with his hand, looking at Will, tilting his head slightly to the side curiously. "What can you tell me about him?" he asks suddenly. Graham doesn't understand the question, so he clarifies, taking the fork in his hand. "I mean, you analyze maniacs and psychos. What can you say about Verger?"

Will might have choked if he were eating anything at this point, but instead he only flinches at the unpleasant wave of emotion that came over him in a flash and, after a little hesitation, sits down across from Matthew, avoiding a direct look at him. "Are you... sure you really want to talk about this?" he clarifies awkwardly, glancing at him, frowning slightly.

Brown shrugs. "I'm just curious about your opinion" he says, casually sending a piece of scrambled egg into his mouth.

Will stares at him thoughtfully, trying to understand how Matthew seems to be both ignoring his traumatic experience and talking about it so calmly, as well as faltering at every rustle outside the window at the same time. It seems to him that Brown has redirected his fear into anger, into building a plan of revenge in his head, hiding it behind several doors inside his mind, not yet ready to share it with anyone.

Finally Graham does sigh and shrug, looking down at his plate again. "Well, he is a sadist who takes pleasure in acts of cruelty and sexual violence, motivated by a desire to feel power over people, using manipulation and often seeking to humiliate the victim and destroy their psyche by any means possible. Leaving not only scars but psychological traumas on people as well seems to be the goal. He was born that way, and his authority figure - probably his father - fostered a culture of violence and the cultivation of power. He grew up in a slaughterhouse, and, perhaps, not only literally, but also metaphorically speaking" Will wrinkles his nose, feeling disgusted. "It would be surprising if he grew up normal, but his level of desire for violence is still something too sick. He's used to impunity, he's never been a victim himself, and it's hard to imagine how anyone could ever put him in that position, wound him, put a knife under his skin deep enough to hurt him. Leaving him with no power over the situation is what would be the closest thing to that. Something like... drugging him" he finally sends a forkful of scrambled eggs into his mouth and sips water before lifting his gaze, looking at Matthew. "...And this is not an instruction manual, by the way."

"Sure," Brown unconvincingly agrees, and then smiles at him in a completely innocent and charming way.

Will wonders if he's just added a new detail to his revenge plan.

After breakfast, they go out to the backyard, and Matthew is a little grudgingly adjusting the hood covering his ears, but soon he manages to turn his full attention to the small barrel into which Will is throwing Brown's clothes, and to the matchbox he gives him. Matthew smiles at him gratefully and then burns the clothes, watching the fire until it goes out completely. His eyes begin to really sparkle with mischief for the first time in a long time, and he smiles at Will even as they walk back into the house. He feels invigorated and active, and he can't find any rest, keeping up with Graham even as he starts working on the engine. He gives him the tools and parts he asks for, even though he doesn't even know their proper names (Will has to simplify his explanations or just point his finger), and entertains him with chatter, telling him about the time before his imprisonment at the Vergers, about little pleasures like making a campfire in the countryside or drinking a flaming sambuca at the bar. He doesn't even care if Graham is listening to him or not, but when he shows that he really did hear every word he said by asking a clarifying question, Matthew dawns a new smile, wiggling his tail slightly, unable to contain the hyperactivity that this has brought out in him.

"Is that what you usually do on the weekends?" Brown asks suddenly curious as Will finishes his work and wipes his hands with a rag.

"Well... among other things," he shrugs. "Mostly I do chores, something I don't have time for on weekdays. Cleaning. Or just spending time with the dogs."

Matthew smiles a little. "No going out to a bar or a club, huh? Could have guessed that. And what, you don't have some, you know, board game or something here?"

Will snorts, getting up off the floor. "No, I don't have any friends to play that kind of stuff" he replies without much regret, starting to clean everything up, accepting Brown's help. "Are you that bored?" he asks.

Matthew shrugs. "Thinking of something to occupy myself with to distract myself. My back is starting to hurt again" he wrinkles his nose in frustration, saying it like it's a minor annoying inconvenience.

Will looks as if he's just remembered that and focuses his gaze on the wound on Brown's chin. "Shit. I forgot to treat that this morning... I need to put bandages on your back so the lacerations heal properly" he says nervously, going off to get the first aid kit in the bathroom and Matthew doesn't even have time to say anything back to him. In the end he only sighs as he pulls off his robe and then his t-shirt, immediately noticing a couple of small bloodstains. It couldn't have been too bad, he thought. He's always been more careless about his own health than that of his patients.

When Graham returns, Matthew doesn't start showing off after all, because he notices his worried look directed at his shirt, so he sighs and turns his back to him, sitting down on the edge of the bed. Will moves closer and examines the lacerations, wrinkling his nose at the phantom pain in his own back at the sight. A huge branding mark catches his eye, and Graham feels anger at Verger burning him from the inside out, and he tries to shut it out, focusing instead on the more pressing issue at hand, carefully working the edges of the wounds and applying sterile bandages. Matthew's tail twitches occasionally in pain,

disturbing him, but he doesn't dare touch it or move it aside, knowing it might elicit a bad reaction from a guy who doesn't yet trust him as much as it might seem at first glance. When he finishes, he decides to treat the wound on his chin as well so that it has at least some chance to heal properly.

He reflects on the fact that he doesn't know how he got that particular scar, and Brown must be noticing it in his gaze. "He did it the last time we met. Made a whole speech about how his dad was teaching him how to check the thickness of pig meat or something, at first pretended to want to stab me in the stomach, but then I fell to my knees so he just did this thing while rather painfully grabbing my ear" his voice sounds dull, a little tired, and Will feels like he's trying to tune out any emotion so he doesn't feel too much pain. This could end up with an outbreak that would be many times worse, but Graham isn't sure it's time to pick at completely unhealed wounds, so he just nods, avoiding making eye contact with him.

"I can look at your ears," he says instead. "Just in case. It might have gotten infected or something. I usually check that way... my dogs after the walk" his voice becomes a little uncertain towards the end; he felt bad every time he associated Matthew out loud with his dogs in any way, though the guy hasn't once condemned him for it with a word or a look yet.

Brown thinks for a moment, but then nods uncertainly. Will reaches into his first aid kit, which has a small flashlight lying there, the one he usually used for this sort of thing, and the man sits down a little closer, gently tilting his head slightly to the side, touching his cheek, and pressing a button, examining first his left ear and then his other one, tilting his head a little again, before sighing a little reassured. "Everything looks good" he utters and, as he always used to do with his dogs, rubs his hair, saying "good boy" before moving back. Realizing everything, he raises his gaze to Matthew's face with slight concern, but he only smiles slightly bemusedly. "Sorry" he still says just in case.

"It's okay," Brown waves it off. "I know you don't mean anything bad. You're just not used to being so close to people, am I right?"

Will nods awkwardly, averting his gaze, pulling out a new t-shirt for Matthew. "Yeah, it's… not exactly common for me. And sometimes I might say something that might seem rude, so feel free if anything to tell me about it so I don't end up saying things that assholes usually say."

Brown smiles, catching the T-shirt thrown to him. "You're cute" he says as he slips it on and, with a sigh, spreads out on the bed, relaxing over the soft blanket. Will is a little confused after his words, but decides not to elaborate on it, walking a little awkwardly into the bathroom to wash the bloody stains on his t-shirt and put away the first aid kit.

Matthew feels like he's in a strange dream, it feels so unreal to him. Will's house seems just surreal after months of being in hell. Every time he closes his eyes, he dreads waking up in a small, dark room beneath a thin sheet that he guessed from the smell of it had been taken from Mason's bed; the man was so eager for control and psychological pressure that he used Brown's virtues against himself, leaving him no choice but to smell him even when he wasn't there. Now Matthew was greedily breathing Will's scent, tucked into his pillow, and he really didn't care how it might look from the outside. He wanted to feel safe, and that was exactly what Will's body odor was giving him.

He wondered if he would have liked Graham and his scent if they had met under different circumstances, and concluded that he would. Will could somehow be charmingly awkward one moment and a strong man in the next, he knew how to take care of others (after all, he had so many rescued dogs, healthy and well-fed), and he was also handsome and smiled beautifully. But would Will have let him get so close to him if the circumstances of their meeting had turned out differently? Brown frowned, thinking about it. For some reason, it seemed to him that if he had tried to meet him at some coffee shop (he actually doubted Will even went to such places at all though), Will would have felt too awkward and confused and would have been unable to make eye contact with him, trying rather to get away from other man's attention. That said, Matthew had a knack for being persistent and adapting to the person he wanted to please, something he often took advantage of - but not with Mason, no. Even knowing he could at least reduce the man's aggression, placate him, manipulate him into getting something for himself, he couldn't bring himself to sink like that. Pain was a better option compared to the feeling of inevitable all-consuming self-loathing. This way he at least retained his dignity and continued to resist till the end. He only feels a little shame from the memory where he kneeled before him so as not to get stabbed, but it was only once and he was really desperate, so he figured he had no real choice there.

Matthew wanders the corridors of his mind's labyrinth, stumbling through a new door. All of a sudden he is gripped by fear - what if Will eventually tells him to go away, what if he abandons him and they never meet again? He would be cut out of the man's lonely and stable life like one item on an extensive to-do list as soon as Graham thought he was safe enough, and there would be no more of that smell, that bed, his friendly dogs, his pleasant voice, the caring touch and the shy look, the strong arms and the soothing whisper. He will be alone again in this big world, with all its dangers and cruelty. Or worse - he'd kill Mason and be taken away from Will, put in jail, or back in the hospital, convicted as a deranged maniacal arsonist, and he'd only have to hope that Graham would be gracious enough to visit him just once, to let him smell his scent, touch his warm palms, look into his blue eyes for the last time. And then he would be alone again, alone, alone…

He doesn't realize he's shivering, clutching the blanket with his fingers, until he feels the gentle touch of a palm against his back, right between his shoulder blades, and he hears a familiar voice leading him out of the cinders-smelling labyrinth of his mind. "Hey, Matthew, it's okay, it's okay, I'm here, you're safe," Will reassures him, stroking him in an attempt to calm him, and Brown blinks a few times, coming back to reality, relaxing the grip on his fingers as if they'd been stiffened by a spasm only a moment ago, and exhales slowly, feeling the remnants of the shiver. Graham's hand slides higher, stroking his neck, touching his hair, and Brown relaxes completely, hiding his face in the pillow and purring softly. "There you go," he hears the smile in Will's voice. "I thought I'd start making dinner. Will you help me in the kitchen?" he offers rather out of the realization that Matthew wouldn't want to be alone right now anyway, and only removes his hand when he hears the man agreeing wordlessly. "Good. C’mon then."

Since it was still a little sore for Brown to stand on his feet, Will gives him tasks he can do sitting down, like peeling potatoes or chopping vegetables. After dinner, Graham takes a couple of books from the home library and returns to the bedroom with them, sitting down on the bed next to Matthew and timidly offering him a choice of a couple of books he thought might interest him. Brown examines the spines, tilting his head slightly to the side, tail

wagging a bit, and finally takes the "City" by Clifford D. Simak, a science fiction piece with a picture of a dog next to a man on the cover. Matthew settles more comfortably next to Graham as he picks one of the remaining books for himself, so that he's not sitting idle either, even though he's read it before; he knew he couldn't concentrate on the text anyway, listening instead to the quiet breathing of the young man lying next to him.

Brown dives headfirst into the reading, distracting himself from unpleasant memories and the pain in his back. Some lines resonate in him sharper than others, picking at fresh wounds, but not with masochistic pleasure, rather as if he were a doctor examining them on a patient's body.

“It's like coming home," said Webster and he wasn't talking to the dog. "It's like you've been away for a long, long time and then you come home again. And it's so long you don't recognize the place. Don't know the furniture, don't recognize the floor plan. But you know by the feel of it that it's an old familiar place and you are glad you came."

"I like it here," said Ebenezer and he meant Webster's lap, but the man misunderstood.

"Of course, you do," he said. "It's your home as well as mine…”

Matthew runs his fingertip along the edge of the page, pausing thoughtfully in his reading and listening to Will's quiet, calm breathing. He soon realizes that he hasn't turned the page in quite some time and decides to glance up at the man, catching his gaze and smiling softly. "I like the book" he remarks quietly, closing it and setting it aside on the table by the bed, leaning over Will and then not wanting to move back, just laying down with his cheek pressed against his chest.

"...I'm glad" Graham still replies after a pause and then puts his book away too, not caring to memorize the page he stopped at, and turns off the nightlight, letting the room settle into a slight twilight. He exhales, touching Matthew's hair, starting to stroke it tentatively. He'd already realized that the young man liked it when he did that, but he still sometimes felt like he might be doing something wrong; he'd interacted with regular cats a couple of times, and it was no secret to him that they could become quite suddenly against the caress and sometimes even start attacking the hand that caressed them. Brown was unlikely to behave that way, of course, but Will still didn't want to cause unnecessary tension between them. He gently moved through his strands, listening to the quiet purr, feeling it with his chest.

"You know what I'm thinking?" Matthew asks softly in the silence of the room after a while.

"Hmm?" Will continues stroking him, releasing the slight tension and feeling himself relaxing as well.

"I don't have my stuff. I mean... I'm not saying I don't have my stuff here, though that's true as well, for obvious reasons. I am just saying... since the fire, I haven't allowed myself to collect anything, to settle down with anything. I've had clothes and a couple of necessities, but nothing beyond what could fit in a hiking backpack with which I could go anywhere at any moment" he guides his fingers along Graham's hand that lies beside him, noting mentally how much manual labor and housekeeping he does. "But..." he bites his lip uncertainly, hoping he doesn't sound weird and feeling like he's about to foolishly throw a rock at the

glass of their cozy home to test how sturdy it is. "I was wondering. Can I have this book when I leave?"

He listens to Will's breathing, as if expecting to hear the glass crunch. Graham is silent for only a couple of moments, a little surprised by the question, and then nods before realizing that Matthew can't see it. "Of course you can," his voice sounds soft, and it brings a touching smile to Brown's face. "You know, if you go, you'll at least have to take my clothes" Will adds with a smirk. "It’s not the Middle Ages; I can't let you running all over Virginia in your birthday suit."

"Oh, that's very kind of you" Matthew says jokingly and Graham smiles, stroking his hair a little more confidently, scratching behind his ear. Brown makes a soft sudden sound that sounds like something between a purr and a subtle meow, but it's so short that Will thinks for a moment that he's just fancied it, but the way Matthew hid his face in his t-shirt in embarrassment demonstrated that he wasn't. "Sorry," Brown says for some reason with a burning face, "a little overload. I'm not really used to this kind of tenderness" he explains embarrassedly.

"Do I have to put my hands away?" Graham clarifies uncertainly, stopping stroking the man, but with his fingers still buried in his curly hair.

Matthew is silent, thinking about it, squinting, and then exhales, forcing himself to calm down. "No. Just... hug me. If it's okay" he adds quickly, but Will is already moving his arms to enclose the young man in his embrace, and Brown feels the living warmth emanating from him, breathes in his soothing scent. "Thank you."

Graham decides to just banish thoughts of how strange this might have seemed to someone else, feeling too good to maintain the usual distance.

Chapter 4

Sunday passes quietly. Will walks the dogs and makes breakfast while Matthew gets an extra hours sleep, and then they eat together and Graham treats his wounds, calling him a good boy again (this time more jokingly) as the boy calmly endures the slight pain of changing bandages. Afterward they sit in soothing silence by the fireplace, which Brown lights with Will's permission, and after a while Graham, looking up from his book, notices that Matthew has dozed off while looking at the fire. He allows himself to stare at him for some time, wondering if the young man is having dreams, until Brown flinches when he hears dogs barking at a car approaching the house.

Graham looks out the window just to make sure, then soothes Matthew that it's still the same girl coming to pick up her boat engine. Brown decides to retreat back into the bedroom anyway, wanting to be as careful as he can be. After a while, Will returns to him, bringing warmed sandwiches to eat with the young man while it's still too early for dinner. While they're doing this, Graham suddenly remembers something, and walks over to the closet, pulling out a shoebox from there, where he kept old things that he didn't want to throw away - a wristwatch that he could fix if he wanted to, dog toys that they no longer liked, an old phone that was still functional even though the screen was a bit cracked. He picks it up and puts the rest back away, turning on the cell phone and walking back over to Matthew. "I'll need to go to work tomorrow, and this will give us a way to keep in touch. You can text me whenever you want so that I know you're okay" he says, handing over the phone and Brown nods readily, going straight into contacts to put Graham's new number in there at dictation. "I don't think anything bad is going to happen, but it wouldn't hurt to take some precautions, right? Do you know how to use a gun?" he asks.

"Yeah" Brown replies calmly, adding the number to his contacts and tucking the phone away on the table by the bed before looking at Graham, who is watching him with mild curiosity. Matthew shrugs. "My mother taught me."

"I thought she was a nurse."

"Uh-huh," Matthew chuckles. "But her father taught her how to shoot when she was a teenager, and she... I don't know, felt like I should be able to stand up for myself too, if something happened" he shrugs uncertainly.

Will nods, thinking about Brown's family's past, and guesses that his grandfather and his mother, in their youth, lived in a time when laws protected people like him even worse than they do now, and owning a gun was perhaps a mere necessity. It was sad to realize that, but now it was to their advantage, and Graham pulled his gun out of the hiding place, checking to make sure it had ammunition. "It'll be in the drawer here, along with spare bullets. If anything happens, you can come up here and get it. There's a shotgun on the first floor... The ammo for it is on the bookshelf in a wooden box" he tells him, putting the gun away in a drawer by the bed, starting to feel a little thrill at the thought that this all might actually be needed against people like the ones Mason kept instead of hounds. He sighs, rubbing the back of his head, avoiding eye contact with Matthew. "As you might have realized, not all of my dogs are

capable of fighting back if a stranger comes, so they'll probably try to hide under the bed. But Max will protect you. He killed a fox once."

Max, lying beside the bed on one of the cots, barks affirmatively, and Brown looks down at him with a smile, swinging his tail. "And is very proud of it, it seems," he says, and then collides his gaze with Will's eyes, seeing the slight worry in them. "It could be suspicious if you miss work or take sick leave, I can understand that. We have to be careful."

Will nods awkwardly, lowering his gaze and looking around the room to avoid looking into Matthew's bright eyes. "I've got books. And a laptop, I'll give you the password" he says, not quite sure what else Brown might be doing while he's gone; he didn't usually have to worry about the dogs that much, as they were quite capable of entertaining themselves by chewing on toys or chasing each other – well, not that they were fastidious in terms of leisure time, after all.

When Monday morning comes, Will is feeling nervous, and really doesn't want to leave his bed when he turns off his alarm clock and feels Matthew's hand clutching his side in a half-sleep, not wanting to let go of him. Still, he has to gently disengage himself from him, scratching behind his ear in apology, and goes off to do chores - walking the dogs, making breakfast, taking a shower. He then returns to the bedroom, seeing a very sleepy Brown sitting on the bed. "Why are you up? You can go on sleeping, you know" Will remarks as he opens the closet, taking one of the plaid shirts and putting it on, starting to button it up.

Matthew shrugs sleepily, covering his eyes for a couple moments but continuing to be in a sitting position. "I'll still have time to sleep while you're at work."

"Is that why you decided to watch me getting ready?" asks Graham uncertainly, putting on his tie and tying it, trying not to focus too much on the attentive green eyes aimed right at him.

"Do you mind?" Brown asks, and Will notices him tilting his head slightly to the side, scrutinizing as he ties the tie on only his second attempt.

"I, um… I don't think I have an opinion on that" Graham replies, putting on his jacket and looking at himself in the mirror for just a couple moments, then putting on his glasses and exhaling.

He doesn't say anything about Matthew walking him to the door like some of his dogs used to do, only reminding him about breakfast, the password on his laptop, and asking him to text periodically to let him know if he's okay. Will doesn't say directly that he'll be worried about him, but Brown realizes it anyway, smiling slightly at the man, sleepily watching from the window as he heads to the car with briefcase in hand.

As soon as the car disappears from sight, Matthew has to swallow the panic attack coming up to his head.

"...Everyone has thought about killing someone one way or another. Be it your own hand or the hand of God. Now think about killing Mrs. Marlow" Will clicks the remote, switching to a new slide where a woman lies next to a pool of her own blood. "Why did she deserve this? Tell me your design. Tell me who you are."

He ends the lecture with those words and starts packing his things, his thoughts immediately returning to Matthew and the monster that tormented him and is still out there somewhere, drinking his martinis with tears and torturing pigs, playing god or rather the devil. He'd thought about Mason's death several times now - by God's hands, by Matthew's hands, by his own hands - and he had no problem saying why Verger deserved any of the deaths that came to his mind. What did that say about him? Would it have been more humane of him to want to put him in jail, punishing him according to the letter of the law, or was he just being realistic and realizing that the man's death was their only way out of the situation, the only way to save Matthew? Perhaps there was a certain grain of truth in that. Still, killing someone with his own hands is something he can't just shake. No matter how righteous the violence is, it remains violence. The old questions of morality - if you kill a murderer, the number of murderers remains the same, but what if you kill a monster? Would that make you a monster? These thoughts make him want to hide, and he puts on his glasses before he can catch a glimpse of a vaguely familiar man approaching him.

"Mister Graham, I'm Special Agent Jack Crawford. I head the Behavioral Science Unit," the man says, extending his hand to him, starting a conversation during which Will can't get his mind off the paranoid thoughts that this could be a Verger's man sniffing out something about Matthew from him. He tries to shake off these ideas, realizing that they're silly and that it's just a weird coincidence. Jack didn't seem like someone who could be a Verger's man in the FBI - he's no saint and far from a perfect boss, but he's not a minion of evil willing to do anything for money or fun, no. Doesn't fit the profile. "...Can I borrow your imagination?"

Jack showed up at the worst time possible, just like this maniac who's been kidnapping girls for weeks now. Will feels trapped with guilt and responsibility from all sides when Crawford asks him to get closer to the case, to help him find clues, to find the culprit. Graham can't stop thinking about Matthew, and he gets a message from the young man just then on his phone. He bites his lip, not answering Jack's question, taking off his glasses and opening the notification from Brown. There's nothing disturbing there: ***"Have you already finished your classes? I can try to cook something for us :)"***

"Will?" Crawford calls out to him, clearly hoping to regain his attention, and Will looks up somewhat awkwardly, but doesn't stop his gaze on the man. He's silent for a moment longer, and then he decides to make up his mind after all. He thinks he could use some FBI people he could trust, and trust needed to be explored in some sort of closeness. At the same time, he couldn't afford to rush off to Minnesota right now, leaving Matthew alone for this long.

"I'll help with the investigation, Jack, but I can't go" Will says and tries to continue before Crawford says anything else. "I... You're unlikely to find the body because you haven't found any of them yet anyway, and if that changes I'll come to Baltimore and look at it, or you can just send pictures... and, uh, if you're going to Minnesota to see her family, you can ask them about the cat. Did she actually feed it before she left, or did she not have time to do so? It might give us insight into exactly when he got to her" he speaks quickly, nervously, and

corrects his glasses, avoiding looking too much into the faces of the girls on the wall. "It could be about one of these girls, or one we can't possibly know. They could be a surrogate, he could think that by killing them he's preserving her. He wants to do to her what he does to them, but he *doesn't* want to do it, he stops himself" he feels a headache starting, and wrinkles his nose, returning his attention to the unanswered message. Too much stress over the past few days, too much unhealthy food for his imagination.

Jack reluctantly lets him go, asking him to stay in touch, and, on the way to the car, Graham types Matthew back, calming down a little but still feeling the stares of those girls from the pictures. They're dead. All of them. He knows that.

Will

"Yeah, I'm going home. You can cook something, but don't give anything to the dogs before dinner, it'll spoil them."

The answer comes quickly, which makes him relieved.

Home

"Strict Daddy, got it."

"Don't worry, I'll make the pasta and under no circumstances will I succumb to the entreaties of six pairs of pleading eyes. After all, it's not just them that can play this game. I can make those eyes too, it'll confuse them and they'll back off, I'm sure."

Will smiles a little at that, feeling a little better after a stressful day, and finally starts the car, heading home. It was unusual to pull up to his house, knowing that someone was inside cooking dinner for him. All the windows were covered with curtains, no light could be seen from inside, and Graham assumed that Matthew was trying to be as careful as possible about any little things, only turning on a small lamp so he wouldn't be sitting in complete darkness. He hears the familiar barking of the dogs as he goes to the door and opens it with his keys, but as he walks inside he sees amongst the as usual crowded pack the newcomer - Matthew had decided to come out to greet him as well, and it was... awkward, but in a good way. Will smiles a little at him, stroking Max who is climbing under his arm, at the same time not quite sure what order he should greet everyone now that he's coming home. He then reminds himself that he shouldn't treat Brown like a member of the pack, that he's a full human being, and that it would be weird to rub his hair when coming home. "Hey. How was your day?" he asks, looking into his face before still petting the other dogs.

"Read a book, cooked dinner, poked around on your laptop, scanned your browser history" Matthew shrugs, looking around him in a demonstratively relaxed manner.

Will rises to his feet with a slight smile. "Was disappointed?" he asks, understanding that he didn't have anything in his laptop that could really compromise him or make him blush. *He had an imagination.*

"Maybe just a little bit," he squints with a smile. "But then I found your lecture materials in the files. It was entertaining."

Graham recalls the usual content of his lectures and frowns at Matthew for a few moments before realizing something new about him, something that made him more aware of his attitude toward violence even before everything that had happened to him in the last couple of months. He was capable of violence. Violence interested him. It was only a theory for now, but Graham could surmise that Brown felt a form of calm as he studied the stories of different killers, as if getting to know the enemy more, erasing the most frightening aspect of any dangerous situation - its obscurity, its incomprehensibility, its blank spots. "Glad you weren't bored" he simply says eventually, following him into the kitchen, from where the smell of dinner pleasantly wafted. Matthew had prepared the pasta and even made sure to serve it nicely; Will felt a worried look on his face and turned around, smiling slightly. "Looks delicious."

Brown smiles brighter, sitting down at the table with him, but doesn't start eating himself just yet, propping his chin up with his hands and looking at Graham tasting the dish under his curious expectant gaze. Will feels a little shy under such scrutiny, but accepts the rules of the game and, after swallowing what he's chewed, bestows a soft smile at Matthew. "It tastes great. Thanks."

Matthew looks at him contentedly, finally taking a bite of his food as well. "And how was your day?" he asks inquiringly.

Will sighs, looking down at his plate, contemplating whether to tell Brown about the investigation and Jack's visit. He decides not to lie. "The FBI wants my help in finding a serial killer from Minnesota. Said my imagination might be useful to them" he wrinkles his nose a little.

Brown tilts his head to the side curiously, gazing into him. "And what did you say?"

"Partially agreed," Graham sighed, rubbing his forehead, which was beginning to ache again from the vivid images. "It would be nice to rid the world of one of the dangers that roam it with such impunity."

Matthew is silent briefly, pondering the situation. "You risk burnout trying to help everyone and deal with too many things at once. I'm not trying to discourage you from it, you know, I just wish you wouldn't face a nervous breakdown by the end of the week" he remarks.

Will throws a couple of nervous glances at him, trying to realize that Brown is worried about him. He licks his lips, shaking his head a few times. "I have everything under control. This investigation isn't likely to require much from me, they don't even have bodies. It's not like I have anything to work with" he says convincingly to reassure Brown or himself, and Matthew, pretending to agree with him, nods, leaving the subject until after dinner.

Graham goes to bed early, feeling a little exhausted, having taken his headache pills for the night, and Matthew, as if sensing his condition, lies down beside him, wrapping his arms around the man and resting his forehead against his cheek, purring, and Will feels the weight of his palm on his shoulder. He falls asleep thinking he should feel uncomfortable, but he doesn't.

The morning starts a little earlier than usual when he wakes up not to an alarm clock, but to the ringing of his phone. Before he's even fully opened his eyes, he picks it up, stroking a sleepy Matthew's hair as he shakes his tail unhappily. Jack's voice sobering him up somewhat, and he blinks, listening to what he has to say about the girl's body being found in Minnesota. Crawford says that he'll send pictures a little later, and that he'll be waiting for Graham in Baltimore by noon, and that he's already arranged to cancel classes at the Academy for the morning. Will is trying to comprehend the weight of the information that has entered his brain this early when he hangs up the phone, saying only a single "got it" and placing the phone screen down on his chest, closing his eyes and sighing.

He continues to pet Brown, but notices that he isn't purring. "I..." Will starts to say, but Matthew interrupts him.

"Yeah, I heard," the young man yawns, and then still moves to look Will in the face. Graham belatedly remembers his good hearing, looking at his ears. "I wish I could just come with you. We both wouldn't have to worry so much."

Will looks at him a little sadly in a thoughtful way, nodding. They both realize that it's still too dangerous to take Matthew out of the house just yet, especially into the FBI lab where Mason's men could be. Oh, and the others would have questions that Graham would be unlikely to be able to answer, of course. "The good news is that we still have time to sleep. It's a whole hour before the alarm clock" he notes, reaching out and brushing a hand through his hair.

Matthew smiles a little, but sighs as he looks at Will. "You're not going to fall asleep again, are you?" he says understandingly. "He left the body. He hasn't done that before. Why?" he voices the same question that's been rolling around in Graham's head, and the man only sighs, leaning his head back and looking up at the ceiling. He doesn't know.

He'll have to find out.

Chapter 5

Will didn't want to get this close, but now he had no choice. He knew he couldn't live peacefully as long as this maniac kept kidnapping these girls, not when he could at least try to help. To fly close to the sun, but in a way that would only slightly scorch rather than completely burn his wings. He lets out a slow exhale, looking at the body of the girl whose picture just yesterday afternoon stared back at him from Jack's board.

There are three other people in the lab besides him and Crawford, all in white coats, and it reminds him of Matthew. He rubs his face with the palm of his hand, trying to focus, when Jack catches his attention, breaking the silence:

"Is it his golden ticket, Will?" he asks, standing not far from the body, which bore several holes in it, as if it had been poked with deer antlers.

Will shakes his head and bites his lip, feeling the heat and throbbing in his temples. "No, no, this... This is an apology" he exhales raggedly, looking at the girl again with the look of a beaten dog. He feels this regret with his whole body, and only part of it belongs to him, the other is someone else's, belonging to whoever did this to her.

"What is he apologizing for?" Jack asks, and Will feels a tremor in his body and voice as he answers him, feeling horrible at having to voice what he sees so clearly with his own eyes:

"He couldn't honor her. He feels bad" he moves away from where he was standing to force himself not to look at the corpse.

"But feeling bad defeats the purpose of being a psychopath, doesn't it?" asks Crawford stubbornly, as if purposely pushing Will to the edge.

"Yes, it does!" he raises his voice, instantly regretting it when he hears Jack's loud question in response:

"Then what kind of crazy is he?!"

Graham presses his lips together, looking down at the floor, feeling the urge to cancel everything right now and go home, but he forces himself to calm down and explain what he has let into his head and what has already given its first sprouts there. "He couldn't show her he loved her, so he put her corpse back where he killed it. Whatever crazy that is" he gestures vaguely, feeling bad about not being able to just fit this maniac into the usual classification. Something wasn't right.

"You think he loves these girls?" Jack arched an eyebrow.

"He loves one of them, and, yes, I think by association, he has some form of love for the others," Will replies, looking away insistently from the victim, from the bloody wounds on her body.

Crawford raises his voice again, confronting Graham. "There was no semen, there was no salvia - Elise Nichols died a virgin and she stayed that way, Will!"

Will feels almost insulted, and he's not sure where exactly that emotion came from. "That's not how he's loving them, Jack, he wouldn't disrespect them this way!" bursts out of him emotionally, he can't stop thinking about Matthew, about Verger, about how different this maniac was from Mason, that it was almost insulting of Jack to suggest that he was doing to his victims what Verger did to his. "He doesn't want these girls to suffer, he kills them quickly and... to his thinking, with mercy" he covers his face with the palm of his hand, looking away, trying to concentrate when he hears a notification sound from his phone. Jack leaves him temporarily, thinking about his words and listening to Brian, Jimmy, and Beverly's talks, and Will pulls out his phone with trembling hands, stepping a little to the side.

Home:

"The wounds on my back don't feel that bad anymore, so I kinda thought I'd resume my workouts. I wish I could run around the house with your dogs :("

Graham exhales, feeling the always slight wave of peace when he gets messages from Matthew.

Will:

"Are you sure you can do it already? I think it would be better to wait at least a week. Or even longer, you know."

Home:

"I'll get over it if anything, no big deal. I need somewhere to put my energy and negative emotions, don't I?"

"Anyway. How are you? Did you find the answers to your questions?"

Will sighed and replied: ***"To some of them, yeah. Actually I'm in the process, so I gotta go. Be careful there."*** Sending that, he only gets a winking emoji in response, so he puts the phone away, rubbing his face with his hands, coming back to reality.

"...Her liver was removed. See that? Yeah, he took it out, and then... yep, he put it back in," Zeller said. Will looks again toward the girl, whose abdomen now had a man's hands inside it.

"Why would he cut it out if he's just gonna sew it back in again?" Price wonders, and Graham frowns as the realization touches his mind. He feels it somewhere inside him, and he says it before he can realize what it means; the insight comes later:

"There was something wrong with the meat" he says.

Several pairs of eyes turn in his direction. "She has liver cancer" Brian replies.

Will feels awkward, licking his lips and covering his eyes for a moment to collect himself and voice everything. "Yeah, he's, um..." he swallows, forcing himself to look in the forensic team's direction. "He's eating them."

It was probably naive of him to think Jack would leave him alone after that. He returned to Quantico to give the lecture after all, but before he did, Crawford had called him in to discuss the investigation one more time, somehow hoping that he would magically learn something new during the drive to work. Will walked in with a cup of coffee, having just moments ago responded to Matthew's new message and slightly improving his mood with it when he realized there was another person he didn't know in the room besides them. Too many new faces in a day, he didn't like it. He lowered his gaze, going by Crawford's invitation to a seat, but the conversation unfolds a little differently than he expected. First they discuss an article by Freddie Lounds, the mere mention of which makes Will cringe - he's read her articles many times before, each time amazed at how she twisted the facts in her own way just to play on the emotions of her readers and earn more hits to her site. His reaction elicits a reaction from the man Jack introduces to him as Dr. Lecter, and Graham for at first inexplicable reason feels a slight discomfort with the man; then he realizes the source of that discomfort - the psychiatrist was trying to analyze him. Will hated being analyzed, and, unable to stand it, he stood up, irritably heading for the exit. Hannibal's mind was having a strange effect on him, and he swerved into the restroom to rinse his face with cold water and text Matthew - and it was the first time he'd ever done that first.

"Are you okay?"

He waits for a reply, leaning his back against the wall, feeling anxiety building, even though it seems like the last text from Brown came less than twenty minutes ago. He usually texted him every two hours, and sometimes he'd lay down for a little nap during the day, so it wouldn't be a big deal if Matthew didn't respond right away - but Will couldn't convince himself of that. He only exhaled when he saw the message from him.

"Yep. Thought about taking a bath, but figured it would be lame if they came at a time like this and I had to shoot back at them naked, so decided to do some training of your dogs instead."

Graham catches himself smiling faintly. ***"You don't waste time there. What new commands have you taught them?"***

Home:

"Well, at this point they're almost starting to cope with not playing with my tail. Hopefully by the end of the day I'll have made some progress on that."

Will:

"Please tell me they didn't bite you."

Home:

"Oh, don't worry, if they did, you'd find out right away"

"I'd used that chance to get some sympathic pets from you, handsome ;)"

They exchange a couple more messages while Will goes to his lecture, running a little late, and Graham's panic finally lurks far away, giving him some time to calm down. He almost forgets about his feeling from his conversation with Hannibal and the sight of Elise Nichols' body by the time he stops by the grocery store on the way home. He buys everything he needs, wondering if he'll be able to go fishing on Saturday to replenish his supplies, but he still buys fish just in case. He looks at the sausages on the shelf and remembers the cannibalistic nature of the killer he is looking for. He decides to put off buying the meat products until next time, worried that he may be getting too fixated on these thoughts.

A warm dinner awaits him again when he returns home, and Will catches himself smiling as he looks toward the kitchen. Matthew still meets him, surrounded by dogs, but this time he has a blood mark on his chin (it seems he's been brooding and picking at the scar again), and Graham reaches out, using his finger to remove the stain, making Brown look confused at the touch for a few moments, though he smiles at the very next moment. "You need to get out of the habit of brushing it, it'll never heal like that," Will says, taking off his jacket and following the young man into the kitchen, setting the grocery bags on the countertop and washing his hands in the sink while Matthew organizes everything in the fridge and drawers.

"Maybe I need that collar they put on animals after surgery so they don't hurt their stitches" Brown jokes and Will rolls his eyes, wiping his hands with a towel.

"Don't give me ideas" he supports the joke and then they finally sit down at the table and Graham gets a chance to eat properly for the first time in hours. After eating he pours himself and Matthew some whiskey, feeling that he just needs some alcohol before going to bed, and as he passes Brown he catches him scratching his chin with his fingernail again, and to stop him he wraps his palm with his own, taking it away, looking into Matthew's eyes for a couple of moments with slight mirth. "I'll make you wear soft gloves" he says, handing him a glass.

Brown rolls his eyes but smiles. "Better tell me how the investigation going. Why did he put her on the antlers?"

Will is surprised at first, looking up into his face. "Where did you-" but then he remembers Freddie Lounds and sighs. "Of course. I would have to be surprised if you weren't following what's being written about that maniac online" he rubs his face with the palm of his hand before taking a sip of whiskey, continuing to wander his gaze around the living room, flooded by the slight warm light from the fireplace. Brown sits down on the couch without starting his whiskey, slightly shaking the tip of his tail looking at Will still standing next to him. "He wanted to let the blood drip off her. He..." Graham sighs slightly twitchy, feeling his hands shake a bit as he still sits down next to Matthew. "There's a reason we haven't found any other girls. He... makes sure there's nothing left of them" he says, smiling crookedly, and notices Brown's eyebrows slightly furrowed in incomprehension. "He's eating them."

Matthew raises his eyebrows, opening his mouth slightly, and then closes it, averting his gaze to the fire. He remains silent for a while. "What makes you so sure it's a guy? This someone is killing young girls and eating them. What if it's something occult? Some old lady eating young ones in hopes of preserving her former beauty or something".

Will smiles wryly. "No, this man isn't... delusional like this, it... doesn't feel that way" he sighs, not knowing how to explain everything. "He didn't eat that girl because she had liver cancer, he couldn't honor her like he should have, he eats every part of their bodies, everything, every last bite. But it's not religious, it's not occult... it's..." he bites his lip, trying to find the right verbal cover for the feelings. "Desperate."

After a while, they go to bed, and Will has a nightmare that wakes him up in a sweat. Matthew is beside him, watching him anxiously, touching his forehead with his cool palm, his light eyes glittering in the darkness, his quiet voice like a rope being thrown to a man stuck in a deep ditch. Graham clings to it, gradually beginning to come to the surface, discerning the words. "... It was just a dream, that’s okay, Will" his cold palms touch his cheeks and the man finally focuses his gaze on Brown's face and he smiles uncertainly at him. "There you go. You get very hot when you have nightmares" he notes. "At first it felt nice, like I was being warmed by the radiator or something, but then you started shaking like you were cold and muttering. I, um, tried to purr, but that didn't help much. I had to wake you up" he touches his forehead again, brushing the soaked strands away, feeling a prick of alarm at how much Graham was sweating. It didn't seem like something healthy to Matthew. He had some knowledge that allowed him to be able to pick out a dozen different diagnoses for Will at once, but he decided he was just overthinking, and as long as there weren't any other symptoms, he'd write it off as an excess of stress during the day. "I think we should change the bedding. Do you want to go take a shower? I'll do the rest" he offers, stroking his hair with one hand, the other still feeling his heartbeat under his ribs through his soaked t-shirt.

Will swallows nervously and nods a little twitchily, and Matthew helps him up, trying to see if he can stay on his feet. Once he's sure he can, he lets him drift off to the bathroom, and he's sorting out the bed himself in the meantime, wondering what Graham could have been dreaming about that could have had this effect on him. He puts a couple towels on the bed and opens the window ajar to let some air in the room, and sits down to wait for Will to return. The man walks in a few minutes later, looking a little pale and out of sorts, and Matthew worries about him, swinging his tail from side to side. "Are you okay?" he asks.

Graham swallows, nodding uncertainly and goes back to the bed, deciding not to put on a t-shirt out of fear that the unpleasant experience might happen again. He wasn't embarrassed in front of Brown too much anyway, deciding he'd get over it. "It's just the price of my imagination" he replies, lying down on the towel, covering himself with the thin white sheet, and Matthew lies down next to him, this time a little higher on the pillow, and touches his damp hair, going over the strands soothingly. Will closes his eyes, exhaling.

"Have you had anything like this before?" he asks softly, examining his face.

Graham shakes his head slightly. "Only as a kid, when I had the flu," he replies, squinting at the memory. "I used to get sleep paralysis a lot."

Matthew touches his shoulder with his free hand, lightly stroking and kneading it with his fingers. "Maybe you really have taken too much upon yourself," he says sympathetically, scrutinizing the man's handsome worried face, gradually relaxing under his touch. "You probably could take the day off. Or a sick leave. Drop the investigation."

Will shakes his head again without opening his eyes. "It's too late. I have to finish this or it's only going to get worse."

Brown sighs, stroking his chest and tucking one of the strands behind his ear. "You've got too much empathy in you, don't you?" he smiles a little, and then still relaxes next to him, feeling the man's trembling finally pass, and wraps his arms around him, resting his nose against Graham's bare shoulder. "Okay mate, I'm going to start purring for you now, so if you have another nightmare it's definitely a bad call and you need to go to the hospital, it's not normal. People shouldn't have nightmares when there's sunshine like me sleeping nearby," he mumbles, and Will even smiles a little as he exhales slowly, relaxing his overstressed body, and after a few moments he actually starts to hear a pleasant purr, quickly lulling him to sleep.

Another call from Jack wakes him up early in the morning, and Graham doesn't like this tendency, and neither does Brown. Still, Will picks up the phone, sitting on his bed with his eyes closed, rubbing his temple, listening to the latest news - Crawford informs him of the corpse of a girl fitting the profile found about half an hour ago in Hibbing, Minnesota. She had been staked on antlers, and all of this information seems like complete nonsense to Graham - it didn't sound like the killer they were looking for, it was strange, like some false note played by someone else. Jack talks him into going to Minnesota, and Will presses his lips together, looking back at Matthew, lying with his eyes closed but with sensitive ears eavesdropping on the conversation. He doesn't want to leave Brown, and he doesn't see too much point in it. He tells Crawford that he'll stay home since he's not feeling well, but that he wouldn't mind helping if Jack contacted him from the crime scene itself, showing it to him via video call or sending him pictures. After a couple minutes of pointless persuasion, the FBI agent agrees, and Will gets a chance to exhale a little. Still, he couldn't go back to sleep.

He called work to let them know he was sick because he really was still feeling like crap. Matthew overhears him and smiles a little, satisfied that for once Graham will be spending the day with him. He opens his eyes, scrutinizing the man as he gets out of bed and walks over to the closet with his clothes to take them in the shower with him - he was still a little sweaty from the rest of the night, so he needed it again. Brown jokingly suggests that Will might have picked up some kind of infection from a corpse or caught a tick on himself when he picked up another stray (him) off the highway, but Graham only rolls his eyes. Matthew yawns and lies back under the covers, intending to sleep a little longer while Will takes a shower.

He receives the photos and the call from Jack a couple minutes later after breakfast. Graham stays seated at the table, knowing Brown will be eavesdropping while pretending to put away the dishes and tidy up the kitchen. "What do you see, Will?" asks Crawford a little grimly as the man picks up the phone.

Graham sighs. "Something strange. It's like he's mocking her, or… mocking us" he replies, feeling confused and uncomfortable at the memory of the pictures he saw a couple minutes ago. "It's not like it was with the others."

Jack presses his lips together, and he couldn't help but agree with that. "So where did his love go?"

Will keeps his eyes closed as he shakes his head. "No, whoever put Elise Nichols to bed didn't do that. Our cannibal loves women, Jack, he doesn't want to destroy them, he wants to… consume them, leave some part of them inside of himself. This girl's killer thought she was nothing more than a pig."

He feels Matthew's curious gaze on him, remaining a little at a distance so as not to interfere. He hears Zeller's voice on the phone, informing that the killer took the girl's lungs while she was still breathing. Jack is silent for a couple seconds, relating all the information and Will's words. "You think it was a copycat?"

Graham lets out a sigh. "The cannibal who killed Elise Nichols had a place to do it and no interest in... in field kabuki" he rubs the bridge of his nose, feeling heavy in his head. "He has a house, or two, or a cabin, something with an antler room… He has a daughter" suddenly hits him, and he opens his eyes, staring at one point, lips ajar, realizing the motive of the real maniac now more than ever. His speech becomes faster. "The same age as the other girls. Same hair color, same eye color, same height, same weight..." he inhales raggedly, feeling a slight shake in his hands as he suddenly feels Matthew's hands fall on his shoulders and gently knead them, grounding Graham in the moment. He swallows and places one of his hands on his palm on his shoulder, but not to remove it, just to touch, to say a silent thank you. "She's an only child. She's leaving home. He can't stand the thought of losing her" his voice quivers and he licks his lips. "She's his golden ticket, Jack. You should be looking for a father. A laborer, if you think of the piece of metal we found. There'll be something wrong with him, he'll be trying to be careful where people usually aren't, and that's… that's how you'll catch him."

Jack seems to nod, silent for a few moments. "And what about the copycat?" he asks.

Will sighs heavily, starting to sound a little annoyed. "It's an intelligent psychopath, particularly a sadist..." he presses his lips together, thoughtfully stroking Matthew's fingers on his shoulder before he finishes, "is very hard to catch. There's... no traceable motive, no patterns - he may never kill this way again or may do exactly the same tomorrow."

"But there's something you can say about him, right?" Jack tries to press.

Will closes his eyes, holding back, but not enough. "You know what? Have Dr. Lecter draw up a psychological profile, you seemed very impressed with his opinion" he says a little wryly before hanging up.

Matthew raises his eyebrows, a little surprised, but then smiles a little, moving his hands from the man's shoulders higher up to his temples, massaging them a little with his fingers, and he hears Graham's satisfied exhale as he tilts his head back a little, resting the top of his head against his chest. "What's the story with Dr. Lecter?" he asks as he continues to relax him, admiring the expression on his face.

"Jack sent a psychiatrist after me to profile me for him. Well, or evaluate me as a potential employee" he wrinkles his nose.

"You don't like being analyzed" doesn't even ask, but rather states Brown.

"Of course I don't like it, it feels like a search after which your house is left in total mess, with things from drawers strewn across all over the floor" Will says, and Matthew ponders his words, sliding down his face again lower to his neck, then running his palm through his hair and lightly massaging his vertebrae, prompting Graham to tilt his head forward slightly. "Matthew..." a slow exhale, "what are you doing?" Will asks, continuing to give in to his gentle manipulations, feeling too good to really do anything about it.

"You're hot," Brown remarks.

Graham frowns a little, but then smiles slightly. "Thanks?" he says jokingly.

Matthew rolls his eyes, unable to hold back a smile in return, and squeezes his shoulders a little harder in retaliation. "Not that I'm denying it, but that's not what I mean. You're burning like you have the flu or something. Why don't we go back to bed?"

"Calling me hot and dragging me to bed" Will sighs, continuing to keep his eyes closed. "I'm a lucky man" he jokes, still leaning forward, rubbing his face with his palms, noticing the temperature has really risen.

Brown smiles a little. "Let's go already before you faint" he takes his forearm, pulling him slightly towards him, but Will already realizes things aren't good and stands up, heading in the direction of the bedroom himself. He felt heavy in his body and a slight fever, and only exhaled in relief when he buried his face into the cool pillow. The world was starting to spin a little around him, and images of the corpses he had recently seen flashed before his eyes. He squinted, trying to push them away from him, and only succeeded when he focused his attention on Brown's footsteps approaching the room with a first aid kit and a glass of water. "You really are lucky," he remarks, sitting down on the edge of the bed, putting everything on the bedside table. "I didn't get great grades in college just for my pretty eyes."

"You might have" Will remarks through the fog of temperature, but later has no recollection of it; all that remains in his memory are Matthew's hands that give him peace, a slight coolness, an escape from a nagging headache, and the sound of his voice, seeming to him at the time to be mixed with a purr.

The next morning he feels much better, but decides to spend another day at home, just to be sure. Matthew expresses hope that it's a simple fatigue, but promises the man to keep a close eye on his health - Will is visibly embarrassed by this and tries to brush it off, assuring him that there's nothing a handful of aspirin can't cure. Brown calls him an idiot.

He expected Jack to call him again during the day, but there is no word from the man until the very evening - already preparing for bed, Will puts aside the book he was reading and answers the call; the agent tells him that they were able to find Shrike, and that he did indeed have a daughter who looked like the other girls; he also learns from him that Beverly Katz and Hannibal Lecter arrived at the suspect's house together, catching him in the act - the man, whose name is Garrett Jacob Hobbs, killed his wife and slit his daughter's throat before Beverly eliminated him with a shot to the head; together with Dr. Lecter, she managed to help Abigail, the daughter, survive until the ambulance arrived and she was being taken to the hospital. The Shrike story was over, and Jack remained impressed with Will's insight, never failing to hint with his wording that it was because of him that Katz understood the direction

in which to look for the right person. "I'm not just saying this to thank you for your counseling, Will," says Crawford. "I want to have you on my team, you know?"

Graham rubs his face with the palm of his hand, feeling tired, but then thinks about Verger and his desire to get closer to the FBI so he can use that resource to punish Mason and save Matthew in the future. Catching criminals wasn't a bad thing in itself, but the potential opportunity to deal with a bigger problem still present on the horizon and waiting to happen did seem appealing and worth the candle. "I can try, Jack, but I doubt I'll be able to go through all the necessary..."

"I'm offering you a counseling job," Crawford interrupted. "It doesn't involve such strict elements of testing. But I can't avoid them entirely, you understand me, don't you?"

Will nods, not thinking about the fact that Jack can't hear him. "What exactly do you need, Jack?"

"As you pointed out quite well during our previous conversation, I'm very impressed with Dr. Lecter's opinion," Crawford remarks with a dose of sarcasm, but more of a friendly one. "I'd like him to assess your psychological condition and availability. I can arrange a time with him myself, if that would suit you."

Graham rolls his eyes, dropping his head back onto the pillow. He sighs, absently finding Matthew's hair with his hand and starting to stroke it, immediately hearing the purring of the man, still pretending to be engrossed in reading a book like he is not overhearing at all. "Just text me the address and time later, Jack," he agrees with a sigh, and soon ends the call.

Will puts the phone away, lowering his gaze to Matthew. The young man turns the page of the book. "You don't seem to mind so much having someone doing a little search inside your skull" Brown remarks, tilting his head to look up at Graham from below.

Will sighs, threading his fingers through his soft strands, looking into calm green eyes, and then replies with a resigned shrug:

"I guess I can handle a little mess."

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dr. Lecter's office is spacious, and yet, being in it for the first time, Graham feels something akin to suffocation. Avoiding eye contact, he finds himself frozen for a moment, looking at a huge number of books, and Hannibal, noticing this, suggests that he could take a closer look at them, going up to the second floor while he quickly finishes with some necessities. Will agrees, largely to increase the distance between himself and the psychiatrist, feeling the need to defend himself even before the attack itself begins.

The books make him think about Matthew, left alone at home. He's given most of his time when Will is not around to reading books, devouring the contents of Graham's home library at an enviable rate, with a particular preference for science fiction like Bradbury and Simak. The thought of buying him a new book crosses his mind, maybe he could stop by the store on the way home. Or, even better, he could pick some board game - Will wasn't particularly fond of them, except for chess, but he could at least try. Graham suddenly slips his gaze from the bookshelves, tired of reading through piles of medical terms in Latin, and suddenly notices Hannibal moving away from his desk and looking up at him with some kind of document in his hands.

"What's that?" Will asks, unable to read anything from his position.

"Your psychological evaluation" explains Lecter and lowers his gaze to the words and his elegant signature in the corner. "You are totally functional and more or less sane. Well done" there's a faintly ironic smirk on his face.

Will frowns a little incomprehensibly. "Did you just rubber stamp me?" he asks.

"Yes," Hannibal replies without a shred of embarrassment, glancing at Graham, still standing a distance away from him closer to the bookshelves. "Jack Crawford may lay his weary head to rest knowing he didn't break you and our conversation can proceed unobstructed by paperwork."

That's curious. Will frowns slightly, shoving his hands in his pockets as he leisurely strolls across the second floor of the room. The doctor's desire to call these talks conversations rather than sessions might look like an attempt to build a special line of trust; a unique approach to a patient who is obviously an uncooperative and distrustful one. "Jack thinks that I need therapy," he still notes.

"What you need is a way out of dark places when Jack sends you there" the doctor seems confident enough in his words, but Graham is still confused by something he can’t completely understand. It's suspicious - this man is ready to deceive the FBI. In little things, of course - but it's definitely an indication nonetheless. "And these places are very dark, as I've had the opportunity to see."

Will nods, averting his gaze from him again and continuing to pace along the rows of bookshelves. "Did Jack only ask for your help with the Shrike, or did he contact you about the Copycat as well?"

"You're so sure it was a copycat," the man remarks curiously. "What gave him away?"

Graham snorts. "Everything. It's like he had to show me a negative so that I could see the positive. That crime scene was practically gift-wrapped" he wrinkles his nose, waving his hand indefinitely. "To not see the difference with what Hobbs was doing and this would be heinously ignorant. Violence, treating the victim like a pig and nothing more - when Garrett Jacob Hobbs consumed the meat of his victims, he did it almost religiously, sacredly, to him it was all about love. This killer, if he did take the lungs to consume them, perceived it as a slightly unusual trip to the market for some fresh meat. It was painful for Hobbs to hurt these girls - the copycat didn't care, he might even have smiled at the look of pain on her face, because in his opinion, she wasn't someone worthy of passing away peacefully."

Hannibal looks at him thoughtfully, and Will tries to lower the degree of his own anger rising from the depths of his soul. That anger wasn't even directed at this nameless wannabe, no - it had a rather specific object, one that was arguably many times worse than this unknown man.

Lecter, as if noticing his internal struggle, tilted his head slightly to the side with curiosity. "When you looked at the pictures from that field, did you imagine yourself in the place of the copycat, as if you were committing these acts of violence yourself? Were you putting on his skin?" receiving a nervous nod in response from Will, who was still avoiding eye contact, Hannibal decides to continue asking, learning new things about this interesting man. "How did it make you feel?"

Will wrinkles his nose, and the hatred for Mason boils in him so much it's like water trying to splash out from under the lid of a pot. "Like someone else. Like someone capable of a form of violence I'm not capable of, someone who can **do** something I'm not capable of" he replies and forces himself to shut up, turning away and staring tensely at the books, trying to distract himself with them. Medicine, surgery, psychiatry, psychiatry, psychiatry, psychiatry, cooking, art. Ten, nine, eight, exhale.

"Sounds very personal" Hannibal remarks, assuming that Will has lived through the experience of being a victim of violence in the past, or that he has witnessed something similar from the outside – which in his case could be particularly the same thing. There was helplessness, anger, despair in his speech, in his tone, something he was trying to hide, obviously in order to avoid saying, giving away too much. It was as if he were standing in Lecter's path to one of the rooms of his mind, which has the immense torrent of water trying to dislodge from within, but Will kept blocking the way, not letting Lecter any closer or anything that was inside out. He'd love to find a way to get inside and examine everything thoroughly and meticulously, but that would require patience, and he was ready. "Will," he gets his attention, and Graham does turn around, looking at him, "the mirrors in your mind can reflect the best of yourself, not the worst of someone else. And you're much better than you think you are," he remarks promisingly, and Will looks away, wondering if there was any truth to that.

He's getting uncomfortable in his own head, and he tries to switch gears. "Jack told me what happened at the Hobbs' house. You and Beverly saved a girl's life."

Hannibal knows Will just tried to throw a rock to the side to shift the focus away from Lecter and himself, but he's fine with it. "This isn't the first life I've saved due to my experience as a surgeon."

"Just a Tuesday then?"

"Ms. Katz did most of the work. I was more like an assistant."

"You sound as if you have an adequate perspective on what happened," Will remarks with a slight chuckle. "Saving someone's life sometimes… imposes a certain sense of responsibility. Or a God complex."

Hannibal smiles slightly, looking intently at Graham coming down from the second floor. "Have you saved anyone's life, Will?" he asks.

The man is hesitant to answer for only a few moments. "I was a cop. Sure, I saved people" he only takes a cursory look at Lecter's face, immediately focusing on the furnishings and the document of his psychological evaluation lying on his chair.

Hannibal tilts his head slightly to the side, looking at Graham. "And no sense of responsibility?"

Will snorts, taking the papers from the chair, standing with his back to Lecter. "Oh, I'm full of responsibility" he runs his gaze over the lines of text, wondering how far from the truth it could be.

"And guilt?"

Graham frowns for a moment, opening his mouth, trying to find how to answer this question. "Some… form of guilt, I guess."

"Because you don't think you're capable of doing something?" Lecter asks, and Will raises his eyebrows, turning around, looking at him standing a few feet away. Graham feels like a mouse, trapped in a dead end with a screaming sign symbolizing the painful precision of those words. He did feel the guilt inside him for not being able to simply deal with Mason, ridding Matthew of a monster that didn't live under his bed and wasn't a figment of his imagination, but sat in his personal castle and was probably organizing a search for him by now. "You said that the copycat is, in your opinion, more capable of what you are not. Is there someone you want to kill, Will?"

The question comes out of the blue, and Will lets out a chuckle as a defensive reaction, looking up into the doctor's face, but he remains calm, as if he were asking Graham about the weather outside the window. "Wow. Well, I guess this is the part of the evening where you decide to reconsider your overly hasty decision" he says, taking a step closer, holding out a paper with doctor’s signature.

Lecter doesn't accept it, shaking his head slightly. "I don't do rash things often, and this wasn't one of them for sure. We're just talking now, Will, because I believe it will be far more helpful to you than simply burying your worries and sending you back to teaching."

"Friendly conversations fenced off by the police tape of doctor-patient confidentiality," Graham remarks with a dose of sarcasm, placing the papers on Hannibal's desk and sitting down on the edge of it. "Everyone has thought about killing someone one way or another" he says, sighing. "I have no *intention* of killing anyone, Dr. Lecter, just a thought shrouded in a fog of longing."

This Will actually turns out to be even more interesting than Hannibal had thought. The doctor hides a smile, which is easy enough when blue eyes continue to avoid looking directly at his face. "What causes you to have that thought?" he asks, though he's starting to guess at putting those pieces of the puzzle together himself - Will's non-acceptance of violence, his clearly drawn line between just and unjust, his responsibility and his guilt. It's a cocktail he hasn't tasted before, and it is a bit salty on the palate.

"I have more reasons to want to kill this man than reasons not to" Graham says neatly. "Take your pick - the need for safety, protection, the desire for justice, vengeance... common sense" he feigns a strained smile, still turning and looking at the doctor.

"And on the other side of the scale?" the man asks.

"I'm not a murderer" Will answers without delay, looking away again.

"And morality is more important than safety and protection?" Hannibal looks at him with interest, waiting for an answer, and they clash glances. Will looks startled by the question and finds no answer to it. "The word 'protection' that you chose when telling your story implies that there is someone you want to protect. Is it the same person you feel responsible for? The same person to whom you feel guilty about something you feel unable to do?" he asks, but Will doesn't answer; he doesn't need to. Hannibal continues. "There is nothing wrong with wanting to help someone you care for, especially when they have been unjustly wronged."

Graham stands up from the edge of the desk, continuing to pace nervously around the office, trying to do so, however, slowly and as calmly as possible to hide his mood. "I'm in the process of finding a solution that won't get anyone killed," he finally says, stopping by a little statue of a deer on one of the pedestals.

Hannibal unobtrusively finds himself beside him. "I dare to assume it's complicated, since you still haven't gone to the police or the FBI" he remarks.

"Well, you assumed correctly" the younger man sighs, gazing thoughtfully at a decorative element. "Like trying to find the right path in an unfamiliar dark forest while tied up and blindfolded."

"The woods are lovely, dark and deep, but I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep, and miles to go before I sleep..." Hannibal quotes wistfully one of Robert Frost's poems.

Will nods, pondering this. "Yeah, like that."

Lecter stops behind him and, after only a moment's hesitation, quietly, cautiously inhales the man's scent, which he has only superficially smelled before, not allowing himself to study it. He immediately senses cheap aftershave, the dogs whose hair has settled faintly on the man's pants, something like an incipient illness, and the unmistakable scent of a catman, his peculiar pheromones settling tightly on Graham's skin. It's a little confusing, especially in light of what Jack and Alana have told Lecter about Graham's unsociability and loneliness. Lecter allows himself to cautiously draw far-reaching conclusions as he watches Will touch the antlers of the statuette in a nonchalant manner. He sighs, stopping at his shoulder and slipping his hands into the pockets. "The promises we don't voice are often more important for us than the ones we have to put into words. And we become forever responsible for the ones who we have tamed."

Will turns over his shoulder, looking at Hannibal, frowning slightly, trying to figure out if his words seemed like a hint, and if they did, how the man was able to recognize the object of his concern. He is overcome with anxiety, but is only confronted by a wall of calm, a facade that hides what is going on behind it like the scenery in a play.

"Don't forget the result of your psychological eval" the doctor calmly reminds Graham, stepping away from him back to his desk, giving the man one last glance and leaving him to marinate in his own thoughts.

Will has prey he wants to hunt. He has potential that he can't see in himself yet, but to Hannibal it's as clear as the sky on a sunny day. Lecter has only to gently nudge Graham in the right direction to get the chance to witness his rebirth, his becoming.

And how could he resist something like that?

Chapter End Notes

> Hey everyone, thanks for the feedback, it means a lot to me and it makes me feel good that you're interested in my work! especially since it's going to be about as big as my very first one on this ship, heh. i have a lot of ideas about what happens next, now that hannibal is here too. and i really promise not to kill any of that holy trinity this time lol

Chapter 7

When Will arrives home in the evening, he expects Matthew to greet him at the door, as he did every day before, taking his symbolic place among the pack, but this time Brown is not among them. It makes Graham nervous; he cautiously makes his way to the kitchen, however neither dinner nor the boy himself is there. "Matthew?" he decides to call out, and only then, after a pause of a few seconds, he does hear hurried footsteps down the stairs and exhale with relief. His relief fades, though, when he sees a worried Brown, gun in hand and panic in his eyes, frozen on the last step and looking at Will. They stare at each other in silence for a couple of seconds, and Graham isn't quite sure what he's supposed to do, but clearly realizes that Matthew is scared of something. "Matthew...?" he says uncertainly, glancing down at the gun, and it's as if only then does Brown notice it in his hands, awkwardly taking a couple steps to the nearest dresser and placing the weapon there. "Is something... happened?"

"I... uh... I don’t..." the young man mutters awkwardly and slightly anxiously, scratching himself behind his ear in some attempt to calm himself down; his gaze is running from window to window, and Will can tell he's trying to come to his senses after a panic attack or something similar. He can't concentrate, as if there's unknown danger around him on all sides, and Graham decides to make some attempt to help, stepping closer to him, holding his palms out slightly in front of him, gradually filling his field of vision, and Matthew finally stops his gaze on his face when he freezes a step away from him. He swallows. "I... I had a nightmare and got a little paranoid for a bit..." he says it embarrassed, and red spots appear on his cheeks and neck, as if he's ashamed of overreacting so emotionally; he doesn't seem to be used to being like this, preferring to remain either cold and collected or turn everything into a joke. It occurs to Will that it seems that after so many days the forts Brown had built are no longer able to withstand the pressure of everything he's been through and all the dangers left around him, and he sighs, giving him a small smile.

"It's alright" he tries to speak softly, "do you want me to check out the area? We can look around the house together, just to be sure" he offers.

Matthew looks up at him and his gaze lights up with warm appreciation, but he bites his lip and still shakes his head. "There's really no need for that. I didn't hear or see anything suspicious, I just..." he sighs and steps back. "Just acted like a chicken fool, that's all" he sounds a little annoyed at his own behavior, and Will can see his ears flinch as he strides off in the direction of the kitchen.

Graham sighs and follows him, picking up his gun and checking the safety. "I'll check the house anyway" he says, and Matthew looks back at him over his shoulder for a moment before turning back to the fridge and nodding. Will smiles weakly, looking at him, embarrassed at his own fear, though he has every right to be scared after everything that happened to him, and walks off to inspect first this floor and then the second, leaving the gun where it had been lying before and only then returning back to the kitchen. "Everything looks fine."

Brown, slicing sausages, exhales, relaxing his shoulders a little, then shakes his head. "I knew it was fine. I would have heard if anyone was in the house, and the dogs would have reacted. It was... very irrational and stupid."

"Matthew, stop it," Will asks softly. "Fear is normal. And we both have to be careful to stay safe, right? And you did the right thing telling me about what's bothering you. I'd like to ask you to keep doing that, because I don't want you to go through this alone. Okay?" he asks, and Matthew looks at him awkwardly, turning his head slightly in his direction. Graham sighs, smiling a bit. "Hey, I totally forgot. I brought something for you" he says, walking away under the attention of a slightly confused Brown, still frozen with the knife in his hands. Will returns a moment later, having picked up a small gift from the table beside the door. Though there was still some doubt inside him, he decided it would at least help him distract Matthew from unnecessary self-hatred. "I remembered that you wanted to spend your evenings with board games, but I'm not really much into all that, so I thought we could settle on chess for a while at first. I didn't think about the fact that it wasn't really fun until I was on my way home, so it was too late" he smiles awkwardly. "Maybe next time you can suggest something so I can pick something more appropriate."

Brown raises his eyebrows, looking at the chessboard in his hands, and then a teasing smirk appears on his face. "God, you're such a nerd" he jokes, and Will rolls his eyes, setting the board down on the table. "Oh come on. I played chess when I was a student. Though I never knew how to lose - I threw pieces off the board every time. But it was fun" he shrugs, continuing to smile.

"You look more like a poker guy" Will remarks.

Matthew chuckles. "That's true. Loved playing strip games. Cheated all the time."

"Don't like to play by the rules?"

"I like to trick people so they don't realize they're being tricked. Once I pretended to have a lisp for a whole year just for fun," he tells, throwing everything he needed into the pan.

"A whole year?"

"Uh-huh."

"But that doesn't make sense" Graham smiles.

"Well, I dunno. You should’ve seen their faces when I spoke without it once and just as confidently pretended I hadn't actually been lisping for the last twelve months and they just imagined it."

"I had no idea you were such a naughty cat" Will snorts with a grin and Matthew laughs.

"Wait until I start cheating at chess."

"You can't cheat at chess."

"Oh dear Will, you clearly underestimate me" he smiles, winking at him before continuing to prepare dinner. Graham looks at him, propping his chin up with his hand, feeling pleased at himself for managing to fix his mood and letting him forget about the mishap. "So, how was the session with the therapist? Did the search leave a lot of damage?" Matthew suddenly asks, and Will blinks a few times as if returning from heaven to reality, leaning back in his chair and sighing.

"It was... uh..." he tries to find the right word, "weird. But he approved my presence in the field. I'm still not quite a real agent, though. *Special* Agent Graham would be a more correct wording."

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Brown asks. "I'm not an expert, of course, well, maybe a little - but you're having nightmares and all that... well, if it's all really just work-related stress and not some kind of illness, wouldn't it be better to hold off on getting into the heads of all sorts of sadists for a while?"

"That's why Jack wants Dr. Lecter to monitor my condition" Will sighs, and then still lifts his gaze, looking at Matthew. "I'll be fine. Everyone has nightmares sometimes, it's not fatal" he tries to smile, but Brown only wags his tail unhappily, looking away again.

"If you're having nightmares, then there's something wrong with either you or me" he sighs, shaking his head. "Most likely the latter. Stress can decrease the release of pheromones, which usually act soothingly on humans and other cats in proximity."

Will looks at him thoughtfully. "Soothingly?"

"Evolutionary thing. Helped my ancestors to gain trust of your ancestors and to not become a meal or something" Matthew says. "Regular cats were kept in the house to get rid of rodents and we were kept for leisure and as a sedative. Sort of. Actually, because of this, there was a belief that a catman in the house would scare away evil demons with its mere presence" he places the plate of food on the table, looking down at Graham with an uncertain smile.

Will feels compelled to tell him, even though it's a little awkward. "I don't think you're the problem. I like the way you smell" he says, and then still decides to phrase it better to smooth out the angles. "Your presence has a... calming effect, that's what I mean. I may have nightmares, but with you around, they really are easier to bear."

Matthew holds his breath for a couple moments, freezing with the cup in his hands, and then smiles warmly, feeling slightly bemused, averting his gaze. He scratches himself behind his ear with his free hand. "It works both ways, I suppose," Brown says quietly, and then proceeds to put the dishes on the table, starting dinner.

After they eat, they play chess, and Matthew is proving to be very cunning indeed, and he can't stand the idea of losing; Will likes to watch him as he concentrates so hard on his next move that his tail behind his back starts to twist in different directions and sometimes slap the couch, or as he scratches himself behind the ear whenever he loses a piece, or as he tries to distract him during his move, whether with a look or a joke. It all feels cozy, and Will doesn't regret at this point any of his actions that led him to all of this.

Going to work only gets harder every time.

Still, he had his responsibilities to more than just this lovely young man. He still had his students, and he still had his new job as an FBI consultant. The next morning, he adjusts his glasses and tucks the cell phone, which had just received a notification from Matthew, onto his desk, and sighs as he looks around the audience.

"...Garrett Jacob Hobbs, also known as the Minnesota Shrike, abducted and murdered eight girls over an eight month period" Will says, sitting on the edge of his desk while a slide with a picture of Hobbs is shown behind him. "Each of them had the same hair color, same eye color, same age, same height, same weight as his daughter, Abigail" he switches to a new slide and sighs quietly, adjusting his glasses when he notices Jack and then Hannibal Lecter at the end of the hallway between the student's seats, having come to see him a couple of minutes before the lecture ended. Will looks away to concentrate on what he wants to convey and switches the slide. "There was a ninth victim who also fit Abigail Hobbs's profile, but Garrett Jacob Hobbs didn't murder her. The killer who did wanted us to know he wasn't the Minnesota Shrike. He was better than that," he says, feeling the skin of that copycat sticking to his fingers, and he wrinkles his nose a little, his hand flinching as if he wants to get rid of the sensation.

He pondered this murder and formulated his thoughts on it last night before falling into sleep and expectantly waking up from another nightmare. This time it wasn't as horrible as the first, and he'd even managed not to wake Matthew; the quiet sniffling of the cat nearby (and perhaps those very pheromones) had allowed him to come to his senses quickly and relax enough to fall asleep again, stroking his back. Those memories make him more relaxed even now, and his voice becomes even.

"He is an intelligent psychopath. A sadist. Probably will never kill like this again. So how do we catch him?" he addresses the audience and without waiting for an answer switches the slide. "This copycat is an avid reader of Freddie Lounds and tattlecrime.com. He had intimate knowledge of Garrett Jacob Hobbs's murders, motives, patterns enough to recreate them and, arguably, elevate them to art" he says and once again meets his therapist's gaze, and he's willing to bet he could detect a slight smile, a strange satisfaction in his features. Will averts his gaze again, rubbing his forehead, getting up from the table and walking around it. Thoughts of their conversation about murder and responsibility for the tame ones rush through his mind, but Graham shoves them away. "How intimately did he know Garrett Jacob Hobbs? Did he appreciate him from afar or did he engage him? Did he ingratiate himself into Hobbs's life? Did Hobbs know his copycat as he was known?" he rushes through the questions and switches the slide again, pausing briefly. "Before Garrett Jacob Hobbs murdered his wife and attempted to do the same to his daughter, he received an untraceable call" he pauses, clutching the projector remote in his hands, and sweeps his gaze around the audience. "I believe the as-yet unidentified caller... was our copycat killer."

As the students begin to disperse, Jack and Dr. Lecter approach his desk, and he nervously adjusts his glasses, feeling the pressure of their mere presence; he'd already seen the message from Matthew on his phone and wanted to respond to it sooner rather than make the young man worry, and these two clearly wanted to distract him with something. He sighs, preparing himself mentally for this, and is not surprised when he is informed that his help is needed in

investigating the crime of a new serial killer. "...A new body was found just twenty minutes ago. This is the third victim in two months, and he seems to be speeding up."

Will sighed, gathering his things into his briefcase. "I need to be home before midnight, Jack, I warned you about that stipulation," he reminds him just in case.

"You'll be home by nightfall, Will. The body was found at Laurel, it's not that far away" says Crawford.

"How convenient" he remarks quietly, feeling slightly sarcastic, but then sighs and nods. As they walk down the corridors of the academy, he deliberately moves a little slower so he can read and respond to Matthew's message; looking up from his phone afterward, he catches a glimpse of Hannibal holding the door for him, and for some reason feels awkward, like his father caught him making out with some girl in middle school. He cringes, muttering a quiet "thank you" as he makes his way outside, and tries to forget that feeling as soon as possible.

Arriving at the crime scene, he gets out of the car, taking off his glasses and preparing for the worst. He approaches the house, around which a curious bunch of gawkers and a couple of journalists hungry for a bloody sensation are crowded; Will ignores them and instead heads towards a place covered in police tape. Once inside, he follows Jack to the second floor of the small house, until the man stops at one of the open doors; Graham slips on his blue gloves and then peeks inside, revealing a bedroom. His gaze was immediately drawn to several familiar faces, among which he stopped his attention on Beverly Katz. She looked normal, and she didn't look like she'd been too worried after what had happened at the Hobbs' house. It was a good thing. Somehow he found this straightforward girl who'd called him unstable the first time he'd met her nice, and maybe he secretly hoped she could help him when he found a way to deal with Mason - somehow, he didn't know how quite yet. In any case, she had more resources than he did, being a so-called 'special' agent playing the part of the local freak.

He walks cautiously closer to the forensics team, and only when Zeller and Price step a little aside does he see the body, immediately freezing in place and seeming to get a recoil, like a gun firing, jerk back. He feels the lack of oxygen as he looks at the body of a young catman staring lifelessly at the ceiling, lying on the bed. There are distinctive bruises on his neck, a piece of his tail and one of his ears cut off.

As if through the water column, he hears Zeller's words. "...Death by suffocation, the rest was done posthumously."

"Just like the other times," Jack says.

"Looks like the asshole is collecting souvenirs" Beverly assumes.

Will presses his lips together and swallows, forcing himself to watch. He realizes what kind of killer this is, he's seen a couple of news stories about him over the last month, but amidst the events going on in his own life, he'd already forgotten about the maniac so close by. The first two victims were also young male catboys, and the crime scenes looked exactly the same - they were found in their own beds, where they were killed, without a piece of ear and tail,

with a bouquet of flowers either standing in a vase on the bedside table or lying on the corpse's chest.

Jack commands everyone to clear the crime scene, and Graham is left alone in close proximity to the body. He hears the door close behind him. Will wrinkles his nose in frustration.

He doesn't want to do this.

He closes his eyes.

These are unplanned encounters. I notice them by chance - sitting at the bar with a cocktail in hand, lounging in the park late at night, finishing a late shift at the supermarket or some coffee shop. I am sweet and courteous; I give them flowers, telling some story to impress them, to evoke warm emotions towards me. Manipulation and deception, and I'm good at it - enough to put their guard down. If they do feel threatened by me, I don't let them think about it, I smile at them and joke and flirt and make them feel like the most beautiful creatures in the world, the only creatures worthy of my beautiful bouquets. How can they resist me? Certainly not when I used their own weapons on them in the form of special perfumes with pheromones. They start to feel safe, the center of attention, and maybe not 10 times out of 10, but sometimes everything ends up the way I want it to, and I go to them for a cup of tea, staying with them at home alone.

I'm nice and polite until the very moment when I'm not. I take off that mask, no - that light veil, the magician's illusion - and pounce sharply on him, grabbing him by the neck, pinning him to the bed as he tries to fight me - to no avail. I stare straight into his eyes with coldness, because I don't feel hatred or anger, no; it's sadism. I chose them the same way I chose the neighborhood cats years ago, mocking them, doing cruel experiments out of simple curiosity. I don't even consider it murder. No. What kind of murder is it if we are not equal? Can we say that God kills people by inflicting disasters on them? Can we say that a grandmother living in the middle of nowhere is a murderer because she drowns the kittens her cat gave birth to? It's all the same thing.

I squeeze my hands around his neck harder and harder, looking into his face, feeling him desperately fighting for life, he's feeling tricked, cornered by a more cunning predator. No amount of soothing pheromones can help with that anymore. I grin with tension and pleasure when-

The shape of the man he's choking takes on Matthew's face, his green eyes, his mouth opening desperately for air, his slender fingers trying to pull Will's hands away from him, and Graham blinks, feeling as if he's been splashed with ice water; he shakes his head sharply, letting go of his neck, and takes a few steps back, slamming his back into the wall, his whole body shivering like with a chill. He doesn't immediately realize he's not alone in the room, panic, irrational fear, guilt and responsibility mixing into an ugly cocktail in his head. He breathes frequently, looking at the body lying on the bed surrounded by flowers, until his field of vision is suddenly swallowed up completely by some man trying to put his palms around his face. "Will, stay with me, Will," he hears Lecter's voice before he finally realizes what's happening and abruptly moves away from his touch, stepping towards the window,

still shivering as if in the freezing rain. "What did you see, Will?" Hannibal asks, looking at him and only him.

Graham covers his face with the palm of his hand, shaking like a small dog. "He, he... he's a sadist, he kills them, but he doesn't see it as actual killing, he doesn't see them as people, he degrades them to mere animals in his eyes, the same ones he abused as a child, there's no difference to him, they're... he thinks they're easy to manipulate, that it's more like a game they have no chance of winning because they're not equal to him - it's basically a hate crime! " he gestures, still squinting, turning his head away from both the body and Hannibal, and from, as he then realizes, Jack, who has followed Lecter into the room.

"Calm down, Will," comes Crawford's firm voice, trying to be soothing, and Graham wrinkles his nose, pulling a vial of pills out of his pocket and swallowing the aspirin without water. The shiver is still in his body, he can feel his heart racing and see the image of Matthew, strangled by his hands, frozen in front of his eyes. He wants to go home.

"He's killed before. Neighborhood cats, maybe other animals too" he says, trying to sound less hysterical, calming his voice. "He's charming, knows ways to gain their trust, looks harmless and uses pheromone perfume to instill a false sense of safety. He's calculating and enjoys the very fact of controlling these people's lives. He... he feels entitled to it. He grew up in a family of very conservative views; he's had that perception revolved in him through the lens of hatred and humiliation. He's probably educated and quite young, but he couldn't avoid letting people around him know his attitude towards cat people, he flashes red flags like a Christmas tree with bright lights" he wrinkles his nose and still returns his gaze to the young man lying on the dark bed. "He must have used pheromones. There should have been a scent left on the body or somewhere else, but it would be hard to separate from the victim's scent" his voice sounds calm and steady, he puts on his glasses, lining up another fort to keep his sanity, already feeling his body temperature rising.

"How easy is it to get something like this?" Crawford asks, looking at Beverly for some reason, but the girl only shrugs.

"You can't find something like that in a simple perfume shop, it must cost a crazy amount of money" she replies.

"In some cases there is a cheaper option, it is sold in pharmacies strictly on a doctor's prescription" Hannibal says, catching the attention of the others present with his words. "Oils with high concentrations of these pheromones are usually prescribed to patients with anxiety..."

"Or to those who are prone to aggressive behavior" Will says, interrupting him, and Lecter looks at him curiously before nodding. Graham licks his lips, closing his eyes and giving a nod. "He must have gotten the prescription shortly before the series of murders began. That's, uh, what gave him the idea" Will looks up, feeling the tension in his whole body; Beverly looks over to her forensic team and then tells them that they'll need to examine the chemical composition of what they'll find under the young man's fingernails with special tests.

Graham feels the lack of oxygen and, unable to stand it, still walks past Lecter and Jack away from the room and out of the house, heading for his car; only there does he realize that

Hannibal has been following him all along. "Will, I don't think it's a good idea to drive right now, you haven't come to your senses yet" he says.

"Oh yeah, well tell me something I don't know!" says Graham a little rudely, stopping to get his keys out of his pocket.

"Whoever's waiting for you at home right now obviously won't be happy to know you've had an accident" Lecter says, and Graham turns around abruptly, looking at him first in surprise and then with irritation bordering on suspicion; a sense of danger, too close to be avoided, thus leaving only attack among his options. Will grabs him sharply by the scarf, forcing him to turn around and rest his back against his car, and stares threateningly and warningly at Hannibal directly in the eye.

"Dr. Lecter, I have no idea how you figured all this out, but if anyone finds out about him, I'm going to make you see that it's not very smart to piss off a guy who thinks about killing people for a living," he almost hisses, like a cat protecting its offspring.

Hannibal is rather impressed than frightened; he feels a pleasant wave of warmth in his body at the realization of such strong emotion, such dark energy trapped in the tight shell of that beautiful, mesmerizing body. Will was clearly the perfect protector, the mongoose you want to have around the house when snakes crawl by. Whoever the man he so desperately wants to protect is, Lecter can't help but feel grateful to him; he has lifted from Will's depths something like a storm in the middle of the ocean, an incredible strength, a darkness akin to the blackness of blood in moonlight. Hannibal can barely contain his admiration, and he's lucky that Graham doesn't look at his face too closely, gradually realizing what he's just done (in front of the probably still scurrying journalists nearby) and, with a share of embarrassment, lowering his gaze, pulling away from Lecter.

"I... sorry, it's just..." he still feels the remnants of aggression inside and flinches, wrinkling his nose for a moment. "No one has to know, okay?"

"Of course, Will," Hannibal says calmly, adjusting his coat. "You don't need to worry about that" he makes eye contact with a slightly subdued Will, "I assure you. I can keep secrets."

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lecter tells Graham that Jack has asked them to visit Abigail and talk to her, since the girl has recently regained consciousness. "Why us?" asks Will a little glumly, reluctantly letting Hannibal take the wheel of the car since they need to go somewhere together anyway, and he really didn't feel capable of driving safely right now.

"He asked me because I was there when her father tried to kill her" Lecter replies.

Will nods understandingly. "And me, because I wasn't" he says and sighs. "Jack doesn't trust her?"

"He thinks Abigail may have helped her father kill those girls" Hannibal replies and then glances at Will. "What do you think about that?" he asks curiously.

Graham shrugs his shoulders. "I find it vulgar."

"So do I".

"And quite possible," Graham sighs. "She could have been a lure. I mean, I'd use her as a lure if I were Hobbs, wouldn't you?" he asks, but doesn't wait for an answer. "But I can't draw those conclusions until I meet her. Till then, it's just… speculation."

"Have you met the man you want to kill, or is your attitude towards him also based on speculation?" Hannibal asks, and Will arches his eyebrows, surprised for a moment before chuckling and shaking his head.

"I have enough reason to hate him even without having met him in person, Dr. Lecter" he replies. "I saw the result of his actions, and it was... evident enough for me" Will wants to say something else, but then his phone starts to vibrate and as he pulls it out he realizes it's a call from Matthew. He's still listed in his phone as 'home', just for reasons of the slight paranoia that has now become part of his life; Will tries not to think about the fact that he's starting to really associate the young man with home. He freezes, hesitating before answering the call, since he wouldn't want to talk to Brown now, not with a stranger around, albeit one who (partially) knows their secret. Still, he realizes he can't ignore the call since Matthew has never called him before, preferring to text; a slight unease creeps into Graham's heart and settles there in the seconds it takes for him to accept the call and bring the phone to his ear. "Hey. Something happened?"

Hannibal in the driver's seat is tactfully silent, staring at the road, but Will has no doubt that he'd be perfectly capable of hearing Brown's answer if he wanted to. "Yeah, everything's, uh... fine. Sorry. Just wanted to hear your voice" Graham hears and realizes that Matthew sounds a little worried, trying as usual to hide it behind his usual smirk. Still, his words confuse the man and he hesitates briefly, not honoring him with a response. "Will?"

"Ah, yeah, um… sorry. It's all right. Um..." he pauses, trying to figure out what to talk about.

"How's your day going?" Matthew thankfully decides to help him with that.

However, a completely truthful answer to that question would hardly be comfortable or conducive to calming the young man down. "Well... I just left the crime scene, and now I'm on my way to Abigail Hobbs. She's gained consciousness and the FBI wants me to talk to her."

"Oh, so she's alive. Good for her," Brown says, actually not feeling anything for her, and Will can feel his anxiety; he can almost imagine him standing at the window behind the curtain, trying to peer cautiously out to make sure there's no one there and the silhouette of a man only made up by the play of light and shadows.

"How's *your* day going?" Graham asks cautiously.

"Fine," Matthew says quickly. Then he licks his lips. "Learned a few etudes so I could finally kick your ass next time we play."

"I thought we lost the queen after the last time you pushed the pieces off the board" Will remarks jokingly, feeling a smile on his lips and hearing the slight laughter in the phone.

"I did a little cleaning under the couch and found it. So don't think you'll be able to keep the last victory to yourself."

"What, you're not even going to cheat this time?"

"It's impossible to cheat at chess, Mr. Graham," Matthew reminds him with playful seriousness, and Will almost chuckles. A couple moments of silence follow, and he hears Brown sigh. "Okay, I actually had a bad dream again and was getting anxious. But... it helped. Really. Thanks."

Graham smiles sadly, resting his head on the back of the seat and looking thoughtfully in front of him. "Sure. I'm glad to help. Are you sure everything's okay now? Is Max by your side?"

"Yeah."

"I can remind him of the command to guard you if you pass him the phone" Will jokes, allowing himself a smile.

"No need, he's pretty conscientious about doing his job, I think" Matthew laughs softly and seems to lean over to scratch Max behind his ear; Will hears a happy bark. "Yeah, I think he's fine. And you're sure you're okay?" Brown changes the subject. "No fever?"

"I have aspirin, so I'm fine," Will replies.

Matthew tsks unhappily. "Sometimes I think that even if you got a bullet in your stomach, you'd swallow aspirin and say you're fine. What would your doctor say about it if he found out?"

Will reflexively shifts his gaze to Hannibal and then snorts, looking out the window again. "I don't think I want to know," he tells both Brown and Lecter at once, knowing the latter is eavesdropping on everything.

Matthew sighs. "Just... uh... you know. Be safe" he asks, immediately feeling silly and biting the tip of his tongue.

"You too," Will says softly. "I'll see you tonight, okay? Text me if anything happens. Or call" he adds awkwardly.

"Okay" he exhales relieved. "Thanks. Really. See you later" Matthew says with a smile in his voice before, after hesitating for a couple more seconds, hanging up after all.

Graham puts the phone back away, feeling Lecter's gaze on him. He endures it for a few long moments before sighing and rolling his eyes. "What?" he asks, glaring back at him. Hannibal only shakes his head calmly and looks at the road, remaining silent out of politeness. "No, okay, I was going to ask that anyway - how the hell did you figure it all out back then? I didn't say anything that would give me away. I know that, I was extremely careful."

Lecter contemplates whether to answer the question or to avoid doing it. "I smelled his pheromones on you and applied simple logic" he says nonetheless.

Will raises his eyebrows. *"Smelled his pheromones on me?"* he asks. "You couldn't just *smell* pheromones. You don't... it's not... I can't smell like his pheromones."

Hannibal is slightly amused by his confused reaction and the way he scowls as he tries to sniff his shoulder, but halfway through the motion realizes the foolishness of the action and stops. "But you do. It's like you bathe in them twice a day for hours at a time" he remarks with a slight smile, feeling and seeing the man's embarrassment. "And I must warn you that it can be quite addictive. Cats, and cat people, are very skillful manipulators who know exactly what they're doing - that amount of pheromones couldn't have ended up on you by accident; boy is trying to tie you to himself."

"Matthew doesn't manipulate me" Will wrinkles his nose and realizes too late that he just called the young man's name. He immediately hides his face with his palms, rubbing it, trying to pull himself together to stop doing and saying stupid things. "You didn't hear that."

Hannibal shakes his head with a smile as he stops in the parking lot outside the hospital. "He may be doing this for good reasons. Maybe while you're busy trying to save him, he wants to save you" he says, lingering his gaze on Will's face, on his slightly furrowed brow and thoughtful blue eyes before still turning off the engine and getting out of the car.

Graham feels strange as he follows, and decides to put on his glasses to shield himself from the world around him. He thinks about Hannibal's words, but concludes that Matthew isn't manipulating him, at least not intentionally - he's just trying to help and support him, because Will is helping and supporting him. He'd told him himself that he was trying to use pheromones to calm him down at night, to ward off bad dreams, to help with his headaches, and how could Graham call that manipulation? No, that was definitely not the word that fit here. Still, he couldn't pick another, though it seemed to be swirling on the tip of his tongue.

He didn't have time to get too deep into thinking about it, because they were entering Abigail's room, encountering the redheaded Freddie Lounds, whom Graham instantly disliked as soon as he remembered her articles. Tasteless. She stares at him curiously, and he wants to strangle her to stop her from doing so, but instead he merely adjusts his glasses as Hannibal politely asks her to leave. Graham, on the other hand, focuses his attention on the girl lying in the hospital bed. She's the same as in the photos, only paler and faded; a white bandage covers the wound on her neck. Will feels sorry for her, but it's a shallow feeling, and he doesn't let it go any deeper lest it prevent him from looking at things adequately.

"I'm Special Agent Will Graham, this is Dr. Lecter. Do you remember him?" he asks gently, watching her face. She has frightened deer eyes, and Will wonders where the comparison came from, until he remembers Matthew saying that about Margo's eyes. This causes him to sigh softly, still removing his glasses, sitting down gingerly on the edge of Hobbs' bed. "We want to talk to you about what happened, if you're ready."

She speaks to them, though perhaps mostly to Hannibal; he offers to walk with her through the greenhouse with them, asking her questions and answering hers while Will walks beside her silently, listening to her voice and looking into her face, sensing something is wrong. He thinks of her eyes. Those eyes of frozen fright. He tries to remember from the pictures he's seen if they were like that before what happened in her kitchen. He looks away from the girl toward the bushes in thoughtfulness, and flinches when he sees her father's silhouette among them.

It's not like his usual imagination games, he didn't want to imagine it, he doesn't seem to have even tried to visualize it, thinking of something else, but there he is - standing there, with a bullet hole in his forehead from which blood is dripping, and he smiles, looking at him like a creepy ghost. "See?" he hears the murmur of his voice, freezing like a deer in headlights, and as if through the thickness of the water he hears the echoes of someone else's voice, far from immediately reacting to it, turning to see Hannibal watching him warily with mild curiosity. He immediately turns back towards the bushes, but the vision is already gone, dissolving into the green of the fern leaves.

"What?" Will asks a little confused, looking at Lecter, still feeling a little like a baffled puppy.

"You seemed a little disconnected from reality" Abigail replies and Will lowers his gaze to her face, immediately flinching when for a moment her face twists and her mouth looks like blood is pouring out of it. A new image crashes into his head as he remembers her father's cannibalism, and he hears the word "see?" again as he watches Abigail, along with her mother and Garett, sit at the same table full of plates of different dishes. "See?" comes Hobbs' voice again, and it's as if he's coming back to reality, focusing on Abigail's face.

As if on impulse, he grabs her wrist, looking at the girl. She startles slightly, frozen in place, afraid to move as she stares at him. Hannibal calls Will's name, but he ignores him, looking only into Hobbs' eyes. "Family values. Madness for two. Did your mother know?"

"What?"

"You didn't go to the police because you were scared of what he might do to you, or because you loved your father so much you were willing to ignore the worst in him to be able to enjoy the best?" Will presses her, giving in to his emotions, and the girl looks as shocked as a mouse caught in a mousetrap. He reads it in her eyes; "see?" he hears a voice say.

"I don't-"

"You were the bait. The cheese in the mousetrap, weren't you? How else could he find them, learn the details of their lives? You saw those faces on the news afterward; how did it make you feel?" he burns from within and it almost bursts out of him: *you're like Margot; victim and accomplice at the same time, because indifference and inaction are the eternal companions of evil. Is she doing nothing because she can't or is she doing nothing because she doesn't want to believe she can do anything? Do family values trump other people's and her own safety?*

"Will, that's enough," Hannibal says, gently taking Abigail by the elbow and helping her slip out of Graham's weakened grip; the girl immediately snuggles closer, as if hoping to find protection in him. "Come on, Abigail. I'll take you back to your room," the man says softly, and Will stays where he is, staring after the girl. For a moment he thinks he sees antlers like the ones on the statue in Lecter's office sprouting above the psychiatrist's head, but it's just a flash; he exhales, alone, and feels the heat in his body and the sharp headache.

He feels wrong.

He wants to go home.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Abigail. Don't worry, she'll be all right. Will is just really not doing well. Encephalitis is a nightmare indeed lol.

Chapter 9

"I think it was a bit premature to declare me mentally healthy enough for this job" Will says when Hannibal returns to him already alone and they walk to the car.

"The way you interacted with Abigail was far from a model of interaction with the victim of the tragic events she went through, but that's just a consequence of the stress caused by the crime scene you saw today, nothing more" Lecter remarks nonchalantly, but stops when he's already at the car, looking at Will, who's clearly struggling with the choice of whether or not to tell him something. "Or is it more than that? What did you see in those bushes, Will?"

Graham raises his gaze to his eyes, tensing again at the doctor's perceptiveness, but then exhales with a shake of his head. "Just my imagination running wild."

"That's not really an answer."

Will is a little angry again as he opens the door. "I saw Hobbs, okay? The shrike with a bullet hole in his forehead" he replies a little sharply as he gets into the car. "It was weird and it looked too real. I mean... I knew he couldn't have been standing there, but I saw him. And when I looked at Abigail..." he sighs, feeling unsteady. "There was blood coming out of her mouth. And the problem is, I don't know if it was really just my imagination or a... hallucination" he leans his palm against his forehead, but feels only a slight warmth; it's not like he really has a fever, at least right now.

Hannibal is thoughtfully silent for a while. "This hasn't happened before?" he clarifies, and gets a nervous nod in response. "Given your peculiarities, it could very well be just a simple response to stress. You can't deny that you've had a lot of responsibility piled on you in the last few days, Will. Your psyche isn't coping with that burden, and that's totally fine," he manages to sound almost anxious and calm at the same time; like a doctor informing a patient waking up from a coma of his condition. "That's why Jack asked me to keep an eye on you. Will, I won't let the bloody ocean of Crawford’s waters breach your forts. You have nothing to worry about. I will help you."

Those words sound almost soothing, and Will, still avoiding eye contact, forces himself to nod. Lecter gives him a moment of silence so that he can settle down, and decides not to bring up any more potentially disturbing topics today; he only sniffs faintly, smelling through the bright scent of cat pheromones the sweet scent of illness, hints of which he had noticed last time, but hadn't given it that much thought. Now he considered the possibility that Graham might have encephalitis, and something told him it was a form of it that humanity had picked up from its feline brethren by gene-mixing. Even so, of course, it was unlikely to be related to Matthew, since Will would have had to have been infected weeks earlier for such alarming symptoms to have already begun to appear, so it was probably just a coincidence and the tick had been brought into the house by one of his dogs. The situation was still rather ironic, and Hannibal mentally ran through a list of symptoms in his head that Graham had yet to start experiencing. Hallucinations, fever and headaches were all there already; sleepwalking and time loss were still to come. If his condition worsened, he might

have seizures, but Lecter wasn't sure he really needed them. He would have to think about his plan of action a little later; after all, Will was now well on his way toward his becoming, and Hannibal wasn't sure if his illness would slow him down or speed him up. He decides to observe the sick man for a while, just to be sure.

Graham drives to Wolf Trap already on his own, dropping Hannibal off at his house and politely refusing to eat dinner at his place. He wanted to get home as soon as possible, and he didn't care if it was due to his genuine desire to spend time with Matthew, always able to cheer him up and ward off anxiety, or if it was just a product of his budding addiction to his scent. What mattered was that he knew he'd feel better at home, and he did; as soon as he crossed the threshold, hearing the friendly barking of the dogs, and saw the soft, awkward smile on Matthew's face as he greeted him, the tension drained from his body, and he couldn't help but smile back at the younger man.

He soon realized, however, that something was wrong; Brown seemed to be holding back on something, and Will didn't like it, feeling uncomfortable throughout the dinner before he couldn't bear to ask the younger man what he was so concerned about. Matthew hesitates at first, trying to avoid the subject, assuring him that it's nothing important, but then he does take his laptop from the living room and opens one of the recently closed tabs on it, showing it to Graham, turning the screen towards him. Will frowns immediately when he sees that it's Freddie Lounds' website, but then he notices the photo with the headline as well, and that burns through his irritation even more. Of course she made it to the hospital in time to see Abigail right before them, she hardly had time to spend more than a couple minutes with this girl, after all her red head had flashed outside the house at the crime scene right before that.

Her article was about this killer, whom the reporters had dubbed The Tail Taker (for some reason they'd focused on the tail, though he'd cut off part of the ear as well; it must have been to avoid unnecessary confusion, though, or because it sounded succinct enough, which was what was usually needed in these types of things). Will frowned and ran his eyes over Lounds' article, which was full of intimidating and sarcastic remarks and vivid language, until he caught a glimpse of a caption underneath one of the photos accompanying the article - it was of him as he pinned Dr. Lecter to his car, threatening to kill him. Freddie Lounds, in a short note, remarked derisively that the new profiler hired by the FBI shows himself as a somewhat unstable individual, and, furthermore, drives to crime scenes with his therapist. "What could have caused such a reaction from the Jack Crawford's rookie? Is there a personal story lurking here, or does the answer lie in the usual outcome of shoddy FBI screening procedures?" - those words end the note about him, and he feels a surge of irritation and anger toward this stupid reporter sticking her nose where it didn't belong.

"So… Will you share with me what happened there?" Matthew asks cautiously with curiosity, swinging his tail and looking intently with his green eyes at Will as he closes the tab and returns the laptop to him.

Graham sighs, feeling a headache coming on, and takes a sip of whiskey, ignoring Brown's silent disapproval. "Everyone around here just really likes to pry, that's what happened" he says, rubbing his temples, closing his eyes. "Dr. Lecter knows about you."

"What?" confused Brown asks, tensing up momentarily.

"He said he smelled your pheromones on me."

"He did *what?* What is he, a fucking dog or something?" he asks, frowning incredulously. Will only shrugs. Brown exhales, trying not to get nervous ahead of time, and then, looking tensely at Graham, decides to gingerly inhale his scent, leaning a little closer. The man sees this, but says nothing. After a few moments, Brown leans back on the back of the couch. "I don't think normal people are capable of discerning such a thing. Wait, so he knows about me? And you're worried that he might..."

"No, no," Graham says, shaking his head. "I don't think he'd tell anyone. Much less pass anything on to Mason - I haven't even told him his name yet. And Hannibal... he doesn't seem like someone who could tolerate having Verger around. He's a dark horse, obviously, but... his view of etiquette wouldn't allow him to work with this man. And he promised me he'd keep it a secret - and I believe him. For some reason," he waves his hand vaguely, taking another sip of whiskey and setting the glass down on the table. "I find his therapy methods rather questionable, but in a certain way... I don't know, more honest than conventional ones. I think he wants to be more of a friend of mine than a therapist."

"So he's trying to ingratiate himself with you?"

Will chuckles. "That's funny, cause technically he, uh, accused you of the same thing" he remarks.

"Nah, I didn't need that. You trusted me from the beginning" Brown snorts. "But you didn't trust him. Even now you're calling him a dark horse."

"I..." he sighs and rubs his face with his palms. "It's complicated. And besides, it's too late. I've let him close enough already. Now all I have to do is be careful and keep my finger on the pulse - besides, aren't you the one who said that with my nightmares I'd better take my therapy more seriously?" he gets up from his seat to pour himself another whiskey.

"You pinned your therapist against your car in front of a bunch of reporters" Brown remarks skeptically.

"Well, yeah, but I was just, you know… a little... um, messed up at that moment," Will says, and Matthew looks at him thoughtfully, tilting his head to the side.

After a minute, he decides to change the subject a bit though. "Okay. The Tail Taker, right? What kind of problems does this guy have?"

Shifting the conversation from his personality to that of the maniac in an unexpected way does a really good job of distracting Graham, and he doesn't bounce off the topic, though deep down he realizes he's walking on very thin ice given the characteristics of this maniac. "Well, he has a few" he takes a sip of whiskey, stopping beside the fireplace. "Bad parenting. Anger issues. Sadistic tendencies" Will lists and shrugs. "Distorted worldview. He dehumanizes victims, satisfies his sense of superiority through it and, as an extension, rids the world of useless pests - in his opinion."

"There are just too many sadists in the world nowadays, aren't there?" Brown asks with a slight chuckle, and Will can't help but agree. "I thought a sadist would prefer to cut off the tail when the victim is still alive" Matthew suddenly remarks. Will turns his gaze to him, frowning slightly, and Brown shrugs.

Will thinks about the fact that he didn't get to the tail and ear part because of his seizure, leaving things halfway through. It makes him remember what happened, and the image of green eyes screaming for help and fear crashes into his head again, and he wrinkles at the headache, rubbing his temple with his free hand.

"Hey, are you okay?" a slightly worried Matthew asks, and Will nods, though obviously not feeling well. "What happened back there?" he questions, and Graham looks at him again, feeling the anxiety in his chest.

He swallows and reluctantly averts his gaze to the fireplace. "Associations that came too quickly" Will replies.

Matthew raises his eyebrows as he looks at him, slowly realizing the meaning behind his words, and then sighs quietly. "You saw me."

Graham wrinkles his nose, stepping away from the fireplace after all. "Saw is a mild way of phrasing what happened" he says, sitting back down on the couch, throwing his head back.

Brown looks at him silently in profile, realizing that Will was putting himself in the maniac's shoes, so must have imagined strangling him; he didn't know how it made him feel, but he certainly didn't feel fear. It was more like sympathy, and maybe even a little warmth at the realization that this image had caused Graham such rejection that he couldn't finish what he'd started. *Safety*. Matthew smiles a little and scoots closer on the couch. "Why don't we forget about all this? We still have a chess game waiting for us" he tries to distract him. “I still wanna beat your ass, prof”.

Will continues to stare at the ceiling. "Why did he cut off the tail afterward?" he asks barely audibly to himself.

Brown sighs, realizing he's started an irreversible process of dark thinking, but then a new idea comes to him and he smiles. "I can help you. You know, finish that scene that was interrupted" he explains and Will is so lost that he even looks at him, raising his eyebrows. "What do you need me to do? Should we go to the bedroom? Should I lie down? That would be a fun investigative experiment" he offers enthusiastically.

Graham opens and closes his mouth several times, in shock. "I don't... that's a terrible idea, I'm unstable and it could end badly and I don't want to hurt you."

Matthew doesn't even raise an eyebrow, looking him straight in the eye. *"Pussy."*

Will's shock is renewed at first, and then he can't stand it and breaks into a grin, pushing Brown gently into his shoulder. "You're gross" he even almost chuckles, and Brown smiles contentedly as he looks at him. Graham catches himself actually laughing, feeling a strange

lightness in his chest for a while. "Dumbass" he teases and Matthew laughs, moving closer to him on the couch again, even closer this time, looking at him warmly.

"Gotcha" he says quietly, never stopping smiling, so close that if Will turns his head, their noses will touch.

Graham doesn't turn around, catching his breath looking up at the ceiling, the smile still playing on his face, and he sighs, feeling warm, at home, at peace. He thinks of the pheromones, wondering that if Matthew ever decided to move on, feeling enough safe for this, he'd need to get some cooperative psychiatrist to prescribe him some of those aroma oils for his anxiety. It was unlikely they'd actually work that well, though. Brown did, after all, soothe him with more than just his scent; he had a talent for distracting him as only he could, whether with jokes or anything else.

Perhaps Hannibal was right, and Matthew was rescuing him while he was too busy rescuing Brown to think about himself.

"So?" Brown asks him, and, after a moment's thought, touches his chest with the palm of his hand, unabashedly, continuing to look so close into Will's face.

Graham sighs. "There's no need for anything like that. I have a good imagination, and I can just… go back mentally to that room, back to where I left it" he explains, and goes back to those strange questions he hadn't thought about until Matthew voiced them. "Why did he cut off the tail afterward?" he utters with just his lips, looking up at the ceiling, feeling a warm hand stroking him lightly in the middle of his chest and his breath against his cheek. He swallows and, after hesitating, still closes his eyes, allowing himself to dip into the cold water of memories of the room where the body of the last victim has been found.

He misses the strangulation on purpose. He stands beside the bed over the already dead young man, holding a knife. Will looks over the lifeless body, stopping his attention on his head. "Not just the tail. The ear too" he remembers and frowns, turning away, picking up sheets of photos of previous victims that seem to be falling from the ceiling. "And always the same one" Graham says, looking at the young man again. He thinks about the rest of them, and without looking catches the pile of sheets falling from the ceiling, starting to go through the pictures that Jack showed him, and that he saw himself when he was researching this case two weeks ago. He looks up from the pictures. "Same length of tail. You don't need more. Why?" Will frowns and tilts his head before continuing. "It's not about sadism. You're missing pieces" a realization comes over him abruptly and the sheets fall out of his hands, his lips ajar, feeling a sudden rush of coldness changing to heat as if he's diving out of water; his heartbeat quickens and Matthew feels it under his palm and Will feels his warm touch, but immediately stands up abruptly as he realizes he's back in reality and the mistake he made in allowing himself to be blinded by the shadow of another psychopath. It's too personal to think straight, but he sees everything clearly now, as if he's wiped the fogged glasses off after coming in from the cold into a warm room. The conjoined images have finally managed to be separated, and he realizes that this is not sadism; it isn’t anger, it’s despair, jealousy, pain. He's not degrading them to the level of animals; he's trying to degrade them to his level and take from them what he's deprived of. It hits him like an ominous hurricane, and he tries to find his phone in his briefcase, breathing heavily.

"Will...?" Matthew awkwardly calls out to him.

"I was in such a hurry to get out of there that I led them down the wrong path," he says emotionally, feeling his body tremble as he shakes out the contents of his bag onto the table. Finding his phone, he immediately grabs it and dials the right number, stifling the panic in his chest. "Jack! I... Listen, I was wrong, Jack. This isn't a hate crime. Look, he... he doesn't need pheromones to get their trust, he has those pheromones!" he feels the tremor in his voice and crushes it, clutching the edge of the table with his fingers and squinting, biting his lip. "Always one ear, always one length of tail, he cuts off a part, and he does it posthumously, there's no sadism in it, that's not the point, he... he doesn't feel complete, it has to be someone deprived of those parts, a victim of abuse, he won't have the same ear and the same length of tail. He trusted someone and it happened. And the flowers are not a taunt. It's an apology."

"That's a completely different profile, Will," Jack remarks after a moment of silence. "Are you sure you've been wrong?"

"I... yes," he covers his face with the palm of his hand, feeling a headache coming on. "I haven't been able to think straight this morning. I'm sorry, Jack."

"I know you weren't thinking straight this morning. We've all seen the picture Freddie Lounds posted" Crawford says, and Will wrinkles his nose.

"I know, I know, okay? Hannibal said it was fine, so… uh, just... look for this man, Jack. And I'm sorry" he says before hanging up the phone and reaching into his pocket for his aspirin again.

"Hey-hey-hey" Matthew says, hurriedly running up to him to take the pills from his hands and place them on the table before wrapping his palms around his face and tilting his head slightly to look into his eyes. "Let's not overdose on medication and mix it with alcohol, okay?"

"My head hurts..." Graham complains, wrinkling his nose at the throbbing feeling in his temples.

"Oh, poor thing," Matthew smiles softly at him, feeling an uncontrollable wave of tenderness for this man. "Nurse Brown will help you, you don't need to worry about that. Let's go upstairs, okay? I'll take care of you and your beautiful bright head, my dear detective" he strokes his cheeks with his thumbs, getting Will to still open his eyes slightly. "Yeah, good. C'mon" he lets go of his face and takes his hand, leading him away at a not too fast pace towards the bedroom upstairs.

"Matthew... what are you doing?" he sighs heavily, feeling too tired and exhausted to seriously resist him, especially when he's so confident, like he knows exactly what to do, and his tail moving that excitedly.

When they end up in the room, Brown sits him down on the bed. "Take your clothes off in the meantime. You're not going to fall asleep right in your clothes later, are you?" he asks, avoiding answering the question and going into the bathroom for something. Will feels confused, but finds himself undoing the buttons of his shirt and pulling it off, letting out an

almost inaudible groan of pain as the throbbing inside seems to intensify as he tilts his head. The next moment he can already see Matthew walking into the room with a damp towel in his hands. "Good boy" he smiles at him and walks over and confidently pushes him in the shoulder, causing him to fall on his back. Will gasps a little confused and feeling the pain from the sudden movement. "Ouch. Sorry" Brown says quickly, walking around the other side of the bed and climbing onto it, sitting down with his shins tucked under him. He gently takes Will's head and lifts it up, and helps him lie that down on his lap.

"I feel like a corpse" Will mutters, frowning at the headache. "Or that... mannequin they use to train students in medical schools."

Matthew chuckles softly, looking down at him and gently touching the bridge of his nose as if wanting to smooth out a tense crease. "I've always been very gentle with these mannequins" he says slightly louder than a whisper, feeling a pleasant tingle in his fingertips from Will letting him control himself like this. "Okay. Let's cool you down a bit first, shall we? Because so far you feel more like a nuclear reactor than a mannequin - I'm almost burning myself" Brown says, taking a towel dampened with cold water and covering Graham's forehead with it; the man exhales heavily and Matthew smiles contentedly, fingertips touching his stubbled jaw line, wanting to relax him more. "There you go. It feels good, doesn't it?" he slides light touches along his cheekbones to his nose and then to his ears, taking them and beginning to massage them gently.

Will wasn't expecting this; under the towel his eyebrows rise up slightly and he opens his lips a bit, as if about to say something, to ask some question, like what Matthew is doing and why, but ends up only letting out a smooth exhale from his mouth, relaxing his neck and focusing on the gentle massage and the refreshing coolness.

"I'll take that as a yes" Brown smiles, swishing his tail and looking contentedly into Graham's handsome face from above, eventually moving from his ears to the rest of his face and then to his tense shoulders and neck. Will feels like melted butter, hot and mellow under these touches, under such reverent attention. The towel on his forehead becomes warmer, not as cool anymore, and Matthew, noticing this, finally decides to move it aside, and Graham frowns at the tension returning to his temples when he suddenly feels the gentle massaging motions of Brown's skillful fingers on his forehead, at his temples, and, after a while, in his hair as he begins to massage his scalp with all ten fingers.

Matthew is willing to admire forever the expression of awe-inspiring pleasure that appears on Will's face the moment the pain completely recedes and only the touch and warmth remain. He's so beautiful that Brown begins to purr softly, not immediately realizing it.

"Better?" he asks quietly after a while, when Will opens his eyes slightly. The man nods a little, swallowing, and his relaxed look actually serves as the most eloquent answer possible. "See? I'm much better than aspirin."

Graham blurs into a smile, covering his eyes again as the touches relaxing him and sinking him into sleep continue. "Too bad I can't bottle this up and take it with me to the crime scenes" he comments and Matthew grins, running his fingertips along his shoulders to his neck, taking the opportunity to admire shamelessly the man's half-naked body. "Matthew..."

when he hears his name, the young man returns his wandering gaze to his blue eyes, continuing to smile softly. "Thank you. It really helped."

Brown feels a new rush of warmth in his heart and senses pride in himself. "No problem. It's nice to touch you" he admits, running his palm across his forehead before still removing his hands, looking down at him with a smile. Will smiles back awkwardly and sits up on the bed, letting out a slight groan as he does so, before turning around over his shoulder to look at Matthew again, and the young man greets the look warmly. "Lie down to sleep, I'll be back in a couple minutes" he says and gets out of bed, leaving for the first floor, wagging his tail and feeling a pleasant tiredness in his arms; by the time he returns, having finished all his chores and said goodnight to the dogs, Will is already lying under the covers in his t-shirt, eyes closed. Matthew quietly walks closer, not knowing if he's already asleep or not, and carefully climbs under the blanket next to him, cuddling up beside Will, laying his hand on his chest and his head against his shoulder. If Will was awake before, he falls asleep quite soon, hearing Brown's contented purr.

Matthew himself quickly falls into a dreamless slumber, waking suddenly a couple hours later to Will getting out of bed. In his half-sleep, he manages to realize that the man is sweating again, so he assumes Graham is going to get towels or just a drink of water. However, when the man doesn't return a few minutes later, Brown first wags his tail unhappily, thumping it on the bed, and then sits up, yawning. After thinking a bit more and listening to what's going on in the house, he suddenly hears the sound of a door closing and the quiet whining of their dogs.

He frowns slightly. Will had decided to go out for some fresh air? It sounded logical, but it felt wrong for some reason. Matthew decides to get out of bed and walk cautiously over to the window to try and see if the man has gone anywhere beyond the porch, and indeed spots him there, striding strangely away from the house somewhere toward the woods. Brown tenses and frowns, not understanding why the man would go out like that in the middle of the night in just underwear and a t-shirt, especially considering that it's far from hot summer days outside the window, but rather the very real autumn gaining momentum.

Will continues walking in a straight line, and Matthew is visited by a thought that makes him anxiously move away from the window and rush to the first floor and then to the exit - *Graham is sleepwalking*. It's never happened before and he's never mentioned it, but what else could it be? Brown soothes the awake dogs to behave more quietly, and only Max proves stubborn enough to follow him outside. Matthew walks carefully and slowly at first, treading barefoot on the ground, not paying attention to this so far, and then speeds up, worrying that Will will stumble and fall, or that a fox will come out of the woods – or that something much worse will happen. He reaches Graham, even circles him, standing a couple steps in front of him, looking at his open eyes, his unfocused gaze. Brown exhales slowly, forcing himself to calm down, purses his lips and touches his shoulder gently, insistently turning Will around toward the house so as not to wake him up and startle him with an abrupt awakening in an unfamiliar place. He tries to control the direction of his stride, along with the occasional nervous glance back towards the woods, belatedly realizing that this is the first time he's been outside without covering his ears or tail in many days. He swallows the lump of fear in his throat, again gently guiding Will by the shoulder towards home. On the steps, he starts to get

worried, but Graham miraculously manages to make it up them without faltering, so he exhales. Max follows right behind them, and Matthew closes the door as the dog is inside.

He decides not to take any chances with the stairs and leads Will to the couch, feeling somewhat calmer already, locked in their safe fortress. Only after sitting the man down does Matthew mentally prepare to wake him up. He takes a deep breath, lowering his gaze and noticing the marks of their bare feet on the floor. His own feet begin to ache again, but he brushes the thought of it away and looks up into Graham's face again. Biting his lip, he decides to make up his mind nonetheless, and reaches out and wraps his hands gently around his face, trying to fill the entire space around his field of vision with himself. "Will" he begins softly, "Will, I need you to wake up" Matthew asks a little louder, his thumbs massaging his cheeks lightly. "Will" he repeats, and this time he sees Graham flinch and start blinking frequently, completely disoriented. "Hey, hey, it's okay! It's okay, you were just sleepwalking, it's okay, I'm here, I'm with you" Matthew hurries to reassure him, stroking his face and maintaining eye contact. He can feel Will shaking. "We're home, we're in the living room. You went outside, but I brought you back home. It's okay now" he assures, sliding his hands from his face to his shoulders, massaging them in even cyclical motions, soothing both himself and the man as best as he can.

Will opens his lips slightly, looking lost at everything around him, moving only his eyes until he finally focuses on Matthew, feeling his heartbeat quicken in panic and trying to calm his hitched breathing. He feels lost and his feet ache. He tries to make sense of Brown's words. Had he walked in his sleep? Went outside? It was all strange, and he couldn't really comprehend any of it, swallowing nervously. Things seem like a dream to him; he remembers wandering through the woods a moment ago following a black deer, but that couldn't be happening in reality, could it? What is going on with him?

Matthew smiles at him when they finally make eye contact and then, exhaling, leans forward suddenly and rests his forehead against his, closing his eyes. "God, you scared me as hell" he says with relief and strokes his shoulders. Their noses accidentally collide before he pulls away, smiling warmly at him. "How do you feel?"

"... Tangled," Will answers hoarsely, suddenly feeling a slight chill. "I'm not sure if I'm awake now" he admits, swallowing, lowering his gaze from Matthew's green eyes.

"You are awake now" Brown assures him and smiles softly at him. "And it would be a good idea for both of us to wash our feet. Yeah? Come on" he straightens up and holds out a hand to help him up and Will, after hesitating, accepts the help, getting to his feet and immediately grimacing at the pain in his feet and almost falling backwards; Matthew helps him sink back down more calmly. "Okay, that's not good. Let me have a look at this" he says, kneeling down in front of him and gently taking his left leg to quickly examine it. He sighs, noticing a splinter and a couple cuts - it seems he was stepping on dry branches, and some of them were too sharp. "Okay. Stay here. I'll be right back to help, okay? Max, guard" he commands, getting up and hurrying off to the bathroom to get what he needs.

Graham looks around somewhat confused, staring at his back and then hugs himself, trying not to shift his weight onto his left leg so as not to provoke pain again. He still feels strange, like he's in a dream, and that feeling still doesn’t leave him.

Matthew soon returns with a bowl of warm water in his hands, a towel on his shoulder, and a first aid kit clutched under his armpit. The young man sits down near his feet, handling him as he did last night, as if he were some kind of mannequin or doll. Will feels the warmth of the water as his feet are lowered into the basin, and flinches as Brown's fingers begin to wash the dirt and blood off him; then he takes the tweezers, lifting Graham's left leg, and gently picks up the splinter, pulling it out. Will squints, tilting his head back and clutching the upholstery of the couch with his fingers, biting his lip, enduring it; normally he was much better at tolerating minor wounds like this, but now it was as if his brain was being odd, weakened just like his body, and everything felt too sharp, too intense.

"That's it, just a little more, my big boy, just a little more..." Brown says quietly, and then finally takes the splinter aside with the tweezers and smiles. "Good job, pup, the hardest part is over. All that is left to do is treat all this and get back to bed. It's only two in the morning" Matthew takes everything he needs from the first aid kit and begins to carefully treat the splinter site and small cuts, first on his left leg and then on his right. While he's doing this, he hears Will's slightly heavy breathing filling the silence of the room. He smiles a bit. "I remember how you treated my feet the night you picked me up off the roadside just the same way" he says. "It feels more right now, doing it for you. It's just like in the gospel. A slave is not greater than his master, and a messenger is not greater than the one who sent him - I was thinking about that then too" Matthew tells him, taking a towel and gently wiping Will's feet.

Will sat there, his eyes locked on Matthew's hands as they skillfully tended to his injured feet. The warmth and care in Matthew's touch struck a chord deep within him, a reminder of the night they first met, a reminder of what had brought them to this point. He didn't believe in fate, but now he found it interesting that things had worked out the way they had that day, that he'd gone home later than usual and his and Brown's paths had crossed. He distinctly felt that in that instant the stability of his life had ended, and it was as if he had gotten his little lonely boat into a storm and a mermaid had been thrown onto its deck. Graham felt frightened for a couple of moments from the image of the version of events that would have happened if he had gotten home in time and there had been no one around to help Matthew. Would he have been brought back to continue suffering, or would he have found a way to die fighting to protect his honor? And what would have happened to himself if things had turned out differently? Jack would still have come to him for help with the investigation, and he would have agreed, and maybe even gone to Minnesota, turning out to be the one who came with Lecter to Hobbs, shooting him and saving Abigail. Would he have had nightmares, would he have been sleepwalking as well? It seemed like it was the investigation and general stress level that caused it all, so the answer to that is probably yes. And then who would help him if Matthew wasn't around?

Will let his thoughts linger for a moment, reflecting on the twists and turns that had brought them to this point. "I suppose sometimes it takes walking in someone else's shoes, or, um, having your feet cared for by them, to truly understand the weight of their journey," he swallowed when Brown put a sock on him and raised his head, looking into his eyes. For a brief moment, time stood still, the weight of their shared experiences echoing in the silence of the room. And in that stillness, a bond forged through pain and compassion grew stronger, reminding them that even the darkest journeys could lead to unexpected acts of love and healing.

"Ah, if only this journey was to the Maldives and back," Matthew sighed after all with a kind smile, and then stroked him quickly on the shin for support before getting to his feet. "Come on, you've had a hard day and it would be crazy to lose precious hours of sleep, don't you think?" he says and then helps Will up and walk to the second floor where after a while they lay together again in each other's arms, staying in bed until the very morning.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"How do you see him?" Hannibal asks in their next session (or friendly meeting? the lines are rather blurred; indeed, so are those for Matthew and him; he's all blurred lines now), when the topic of their conversation about the latest investigation slips seamlessly into a discussion of the man's personal life.

Will sits across from him in the chair, leaning back in an attempt to relax at least a little. He ponders the question for a long minute, silently trying to find the right words to describe Brown. He goes through different images, tossing them aside one by one, until he finally finds something deep within himself that intuitively fits best. "When I was a kid and very sick, sometimes there were evenings when my father would come home early to spend time at my bedside. He would usually talk about how his day was or mention some memory from his life while he held my hand or stroked my hair. I realize now that it was because I always got sick really badly and he was worried about losing me, so he tried to be around me more often." Will feels a strange tingling in his fingertips from the memories, his gaze wandering smoothly over the interior of his recollections spreading so vividly before his eyes through the twilight and fog even after all these years. "I loved being sick. I never felt more at home than on those evenings."

"And you feel something similar now that Matthew has appeared?" Hannibal asks.

Will nods and licks his lips, still looking away. "I never would have thought I needed something like this until he showed up. Now I don't know what I'm going to do with it when it comes to an end and he disappears from my life."

"What makes you feel like he'll have to disappear?" Lecter tilts his head slightly to the side, snake-like scrutinizing yet gently looking at him. "Because that's what everyone before him has done?"

Graham wrinkles his nose, feeling those words like an unpleasant touch to his ribs from somewhere inside. "Sometimes I think that as soon as I feel better, when I'm... recovered from whatever it is, whatever is happening to me right now, he'll disappear, like one of my hallucinations, nothing more than a figment of my imagination. And I shall be alone again, wandering somewhere with my dogs, as I used to do as a child, when my father would plunge back into his work as soon as I recovered."

Even though Hannibal had shown a desire for what was happening to be a friendly evening rather than a therapy session, Will still felt like a patient telling him about his childhood traumas and abandonment issues. It was even harder especially when the doctor was looking at him so intently, mentally formulating an appropriate answer or question for an extra couple of seconds. "Do you think Matthew would like to leave you as soon as his situation improves?"

"I don't know. I don't know. We… we've only known each other for, like, uh, a week, although it feels a lot longer than that - and it's unlikely he'd choose to stay with someone like me," Graham remarks a little nervously.

"Only a week, but you're already willing to kill for him" Hannibal remarks, and Will, blinking confusedly a few times, raises his gaze to his eyes.

"...I'm not *willing* to kill for him" he insists, "I have a... *desire* to do so. Not the intention, Dr. Lecter."

Hannibal nods conciliatorily, accepting this, before looking at Will again with attentive snake eyes. "You have the desire. If the man you hate so much took Matthew away from you, Will, how do you think you would feel?"

"I don't want to think about it," he says a little sharply, trying to cut off the threads of those thoughts right away.

Lecter stares at him in silence for a while. "He can't stand the thought of losing her," he says suddenly. "I think that's what you said to Jack then, pondering the Shrike, if his words are to be believed."

Will blinks confusedly a few times, looking at him.

Hannibal continues. "Garrett Jacob Hobbs killed those girls so he wouldn't have to kill his daughter, sought to keep pieces of them inside him, using them as surrogates. He wanted to eat his daughter so that she would stay with him forever. He desired this because he loved her" he falls silent for a few moments, never taking his eyes off Will. "You can't stand the thought of losing Matthew, can you, Will?"

"I... I don't understand what you want me to say," Graham sighs, rising suddenly from his chair.

Lecter remains where he is, only raising his head to continue looking at the man. "Is it important for you to say something I want you to?" he asks, and Will rolls his eyes, looking away, walking over to his desk, ignoring the question. "Have you considered the fact that you don't want to take any decisive action in fighting your dragon because you're afraid that once Matthew is safe, he'll leave you?"

Will turns over his shoulder, looking frowningly at Hannibal, trying to make sense of his words. He tilts his head slightly to the side, unable to stop looking into his calm dark eyes. "You think I can *use* his fear for my own... selfish purposes? Keep him in my tower, telling him stories of the dangerous outside world like a weird sick version of Mother Gothel?"

"You could put it that way," Lecter shrugged calmly. "Or you could say that the outside world really is dangerous, because you can't kill all the dragons" he says, alluding to the still uncaught maniac, but Graham only wrinkles his nose, shoving his hands in his pockets as he paces around his office. "What do you think would happen if this dragon was suddenly killed, even if by someone else, Will? What can you say about Matthew, how would he act?"

"I don't know," he sighs and rubs his face with the palm of his hand, then shrugs, stopping his gaze on the stag statue again. "He'll feel the need to help me. I'm getting worse, he can see it, and he *cares.*"

Hannibal squints interestedly, looking at Will's back. "What symptoms do you have?"

"Uh… headaches. Nightmares. I've been sleepwalking and, uh, I sweat a lot in my sleep. And I..." he sighs, "I think I've been hallucinating, but I can't be sure it wasn't just my imagination."

Lecter looks at him thoughtfully. "Sleepwalking is much less common among adults than children, but it can well be just the result of depression or something similar. Given what I know, I'd argue good old-fashioned post-traumatic stress. Jack Crawford has gotten your mind very dirty, and dragon breathing down your back is hardly conducive to relaxation."

"I can handle it," Will says. "For the greater good."

"Your experience may have overwhelmed ordinary functions that give you a sense of control."

"If my body is walking around without my permission, you'd say that's a loss of control?" Graham asks ironically, looking at Hannibal again, coming a little closer.

"Wouldn't you?" the man looks him over from head to toe before returning to blue eyes. "Sleepwalkers demonstrate a difficulty handling aggression. Have you recently been experiencing difficulty with aggressive feelings, Will?" he asks.

"Is this a *joke,* Dr. Lecter?" Graham arches his eyebrows, remembering how he recently pinned Hannibal against his car and basically threatened to kill him. It didn't seem to have had any negative effect on their relationship, though, which is a little odd, he has to admit. Threats were not usually conducive to a friendly tone of conversation, but, well, there they are.

Hannibal smiles slightly at him. "I would recommend rest if I didn't know you would ignore that recommendation. You're unlikely to find peace while the desire to keep your partner safe by any means necessary is drilling a hole in your head."

Will almost nods when he suddenly realizes what he's said. He immediately feels the need to correct the man. "Matthew is not my... partner," he says, and Hannibal tilts his head slightly to the side as if in mute question. "He's a... well, not that" Graham realizes he can't find the right word to describe his and Brown's relationship. Who is Matthew to him? A friend? That concept was a bit distant to him, as, in fact, were all the other concepts associated with close relationships between people.

Lecter feels curious. "I apologize. I drew that conclusion based on how much of his scent settled on you. That usually only comes from close contact."

"Yeah, we're just sharing a bed," Will replies carelessly, shifting his attention back to the interior of the office. He belatedly realizes what he said, and for some reason feels the

awkward need to justify himself again. "It's because of his nightmares. Or now mine. I don't know. He just feels safer that way, and I don't mind" he explains.

Hannibal guesses that he's making excuses more to himself than to him. He finds this extremely curious and sees the amusing potential in it. He decides to speak after a moment of silence, giving Graham a chance to run through various thoughts in his head. "There are some cultural and mental characteristics of cat people that could be compared to the mentality of the inhabitants of another continent, someone who is human but still comes from a whole different culture" he says. "They see the world around them a little differently, and instincts along with a certain kind of socialization cause differences in our behavior. What may seem strange to us is common to them, and what seems insignificant to us has great significance from their point of view."

Will frowns slightly. "I'm sorry, what's your point again, Dr. Lecter?"

"I've always been particularly interested in them, since my mother and sister were cat people too," Hannibal tells him, and Graham raises his eyebrows in slight surprise. "Yes. I suppose I inherited my highly sensitive sense of smell from my mother. Genetics is an interesting thing" he says with a slight smile, but doesn't allow himself to delve too deeply into his family memories. "I've been studying the peculiarities of their behavior very closely. And I can tell you, Will, that you could easily... miss something, simply because of your lack of experience with this. Not only are they very selective about where and with whom they sleep, they can also be very specific in their expressions of affection and acts of courtship. Meeting their significant other at the door, following them whenever and wherever possible so that they are always nearby, in their field of vision. The attentive gaze and slow blinking, the gentle headbutting, the urge to smell their scent more often and the urge to surround the person with their scent. You may not notice it, but it's a way for him to show his feelings."

Will opens his mouth a few times in an attempt to say something, but eventually gives up, sighing and rubbing the bridge of his nose.

"If he's not your partner, then who do you think he is?" Hannibal asks, filling the silence.

Graham sighed. "I don't know, he's..."

"Another stray?" Lecter suggests, but Will immediately shakes his head.

"No, no. It even sounds terribly inhuman and kind of insulting, to be honest" he says, wrinkling his nose. "Matthew is... it's Matthew. I don't think I want to label it. And it's all happening too fast for me to have time to understand my feelings and thoughts about it more clearly" Graham decides. "And no, he doesn't need a... relationship, Dr. Lecter. He needs security and perhaps revenge, but not... romance with an FBI professor who sweats in his sleep from nightmares and thinks about murder."

"You're so sure you know what he needs?" he stumps him with another question.

"I..." Will shuts up and shakes his head, licking his lips. "No, I don't think it's a good idea to think about that right now. I... I'd rather just keep going with the flow, otherwise I might just mess it up" he burrows his fingers into his curls, as if trying to calm himself down that way,

and it's only after a couple of seconds that he realizes he picked up that gesture from Matthew, who always scratches himself behind his ear when he wants to cheer himself up or feels anxious. The thought settles strangely in his chest. It had been a week. He's gotten too damn quickly attached to this man, too dissolved into him, gotten too dangerously close in just a week. He's hurt again at the thought that this is all going to end sooner or later, whether it be with someone's death, imprisonment, disappearance, or Matthew's voluntary withdrawal to his life away from Will. He exhales nervously, trying to remind himself that he's winding himself up too much.

He walks out of Hannibal's office and heads to his car parked nearby, still in anxious thoughts when he gets a call from Jack. Will sighs heavily as he stops at the driver's side door and picks up the phone, closing his eyes and preparing to take another dose of aspirin. Memories of Brown's gentle fingers and caring whisper come back to him in a warm wave, and he flinches, feeling strange. "Yes?" he asks and swallows, hearing the hoarseness in his own voice.

Jack, to his partially (only partially) pleasant surprise, doesn't talk about the new case or bog him down with new grim tasks, but merely informs him that they have found The Tail Taker. He does indeed turn out to be a young man who was abused a few years ago and lost part of his tail and ear, and a couple months ago received a prescription for a pheromone oil to deal with aggression. Both of Will's ideas and leads did turn out to be correct, but the FBI found the man too late - he was discovered in his small apartment, hanging himself. Will thinks: he strangled his victims and ended up strangling himself as well. This smacks of bitter despair, and he sighs heavily, feeling a palette of emotions, all of which are negative. He tries to push it away from him as he drives home.

Matthew met him at the door again, and Graham smiled a little awkwardly, grudgingly remembering Hannibal's words. Still, he felt that it would be dangerous and wrong of him to take any action or even just initiate a conversation about the young man's possible feelings. Even if Brown was indeed "courting" him and showing affection for him, Will couldn't escape the thought that it was simply his reaction to the prolonged stress and long-awaited security so aptly centered in his image. Like when he'd made him coffee that first morning, or when he'd volunteered to do the dishes himself, he could be doing it out of simple fear of somehow displeasing the man, out of a desire to do whatever it took to stay in his sanctuary, farther away from the nightmares that haunted him at the Vergers'. Besides, Will was quite content with what was between them now - all the jokes, the little bit of awkwardness, the careful sharing of each other's fears and pain, the gentle touches, the embrace. Based on all of this, Graham firmly decides not to do anything about it until Matthew makes his more obvious move in that direction or simply starts a conversation about it.

Pushing these torments aside, he begins to think about the other things Lecter has told him. Could he really be unconsciously seeking to preserve this fragile paradise and comfort for as long as possible by putting off dealing with Verger for a while? He could make all kinds of logical arguments in his head that there was no way he could do anything about Mason yet, that not much time had passed, that he couldn't just show up at a well-guarded estate in the middle of the night and just shoot the owner, but it was all ruined by the hammer of anxiety pounding his skull from the inside. Was Verger even looking for Matthew now? If so, where? Could he be watching their house, picking the right moment? The seed of paranoia grows in

his heart, and he can't shake the feeling of it sprouting between his ribs even as he watches Brown swaying his tail in the evening, listening to music while washing dishes.

He offers him a game of chess to distract himself and loses to him several times, which makes Matthew think he's giving in. The young man is not satisfied with this, and he demands a fair game, to which Will only says that he wasn't giving in, but simply tired. Brown immediately agrees to go to bed early, and in a couple minutes is already snuggled against Will's shoulder with his nose, hugging him tightly and warmly. "If you try sleepwalking again, I won't let you go anywhere" he says with a smile.

"Sounds like a straitjacket for the poor" Graham tries to joke.

"You've never had a cat sleep on you before?" Matthew asks playfully. Will holds back a smile, looking up at the ceiling.

"Getting more and more of that lately."

"You're welcome" he lays down more comfortably on top of Graham, really almost lying on him, and it feels unexpectedly nice; Will has always loved a tight hug and has been wanting to get himself a weighted blanket for a long time, but this is turning out to be even better. He thinks about what his life would be like if Matthew decided to stay with him after all the dangers were behind them. They could go fishing together. Brown could, under his supervision, burn trash or cook over a campfire if they decided to go camping or something. Matthew, though, would probably want to try to get a job again - he really wanted to be a nurse, after all. Maybe Will could help him with that, too - though he had no idea how. All these thoughts of a possible future, of the best possible scenario for the two of them, along with the quiet purr and the warm weight on his chest, gradually lulled Graham to sleep. If his brain was going to give him another sleepwalk, its plans were ruined by the huge cat that wrapped its paws around him and wouldn't let him out of bed until the very morning.

His classes start close to noon today, so he gets a chance to sleep well for the first time in days, and spend the whole morning with Matthew as usual. While Will, after walking the dogs and showering, begins to prepare breakfast for them, Brown stays in the living room to try to work out, to tone his muscles - he was determined that he would need them, and he needed to build his own strength more diligently than he had in the past. When Will sets the plates of food on the table and goes to find Matthew to have breakfast with him, he freezes in the aisle, watching him doing push-ups, puffing with zeal, all tense and sweaty. He wasn't wearing a t-shirt and had already removed his bandages, so Graham couldn't help but catch a glimpse of his bare skin, covered in scars and scorched branding.

"Wait until I roll over, the view will be a lot better" Brown says suddenly, only stalling for a couple moments before continuing to do his push-ups.

Will feels the color flush to his cheeks and neck and awkwardly averts his gaze. "I didn't mean to-"

"Stare?" Matthew asks, and then finishes the exercise after all, and, standing first on his knees and then fully on his feet, turns around, looking at him with a cocky grin. His eyes sparkle with mischief, not resentment, and it gives Will some comfort to his shame. Brown

swishes his tail, spreading his arms as if showing himself off, proud of every inch of his skin. "Not bad for a domestic cat, huh?"

Graham can't stand it, looking away and snorting. He licks his lips quickly, nodding. "Breakfast. Come on" he still throws a couple glances at him before rolling his eyes at the smugness that appeared on Matthew's face from that. "Dumbass" Will says, turning around and walking off into the kitchen. Brown laughs behind him.

"Is that my new pet name?" he jokes, and Graham wants to throw something at him, not realizing how he can act like that after everything he's been through. Could he really start to trust him so quickly, to feel something for him? Will feels a new weight of responsibility on his shoulders, and thinks about it all the way to work.

"... Hector Munday was an FBI special agent in charge of profiling and was directly involved in the investigation and capture of several serial killers about twenty years ago" he switches the slide as he continues to look through the students as he sits on his desk. "Showed excellent results in the course of his work up until the capture of Manny Sherman, also known as the Beast of Arkansas. Through manipulation, Sherman, during his conversations with the FBI agent, diligently encouraged him to commit homicide. During his attempt to get inside the serial killer's head, Agent Munday was unable - or unwilling - to build defensive forts and keep a distance in time. That's why the FBI usually has rigid scanning procedures" he says, adjusting his glasses, feeling slightly disgusted at the thoughts going through his head. He hurries to switch the slide. "Hector Munday killed two homeless men in Chicago, just trying his hand at a new craft. He was careful to leave no trace - all the evidence against him are indirect, coming from the fact that he was coming to Chicago to give a lecture on Sherman just in that period of time, and, uh, in light of further events. A few months after those murders, his neighbors complained of screams coming from his house. Police arrived on the scene and the FBI agent killed three people in his own home, got into his own car and drove off in the direction of an abandoned warehouse where he started a fire and was presumed to have burned alive inside" he switches the slide. "Impulsive. Weird. It stuck out from his profile, but no one paid enough attention to it - after the fire was extinguished, a body was found in the building, and they were able to identify Hector Munday by his teeth. The case was closed for twenty years. As it turned out later, the FBI agent survived the fire and skillfully hid from justice the whole time, and about seven years ago he started killing again. By the time the truth came out, he had 198 victims under his belt. We know that because he kept score. He was an organized psychopath, planning his crimes in advance with remarkable precision. Killed on an island in some estate, where he lured tourists and others by deception, then subjected them to torture and tests, like giving them a moral choice whether to kill their best friend or their spouse" Will switches the slide. "He was curious about how people would behave in those situations. He liked to speculate, he did it even at the stage of selecting victims - using skills from his old job, he profiled them, which helped him organize each of the traps to suit the individual characteristics of the victims. A very organized, cold-blooded loner who enjoyed feeling superior to his victims, both physically and intellectually. He used deception and various methods of manipulation to lure victims to his island - and never once erred enough to be suspected of anything. He might well have continued to do so to a ripe old age, but a few of his island guests had managed to escape about a year ago, killing him in a direct confrontation on a boat. However," he sighs, "his body was never found, so some believe he may still be alive and hiding from the authorities.

After all, he did fake his death in his youth before, and a fall into the ocean is far from a guarantee of a quick demise" Will shrugs, giving a faintly crooked smile when he suddenly notices Beverly Katz entering the lecture hall, stopping at the doorway, looking at him with interest, waiting for the class to end, apparently for some sort of conversation. Graham clears his throat and gives the students their assignments, dismissing them exactly as the bell rings. "Jack sent you?" he asks as the girl approaches his desk.

"No, I sent myself" Katz says with a small smile, standing up beside him. "I just came from the hospital after talking to Abigail Hobbs."

Will chuckles unhappily, nodding understandingly. "Did she complain about my behavior?"

Beverly tilts her head to the side interestedly. "No. She expressed a desire to talk to you again," she says and Graham raises his eyebrows in surprise. "And did she have anything to complain about?"

"I..." he sighs, taking off his glasses. "I kind of scared her and accused her of cooperating with her father" Will explains reluctantly and Beverly opens her mouth shocked looking at him. "I... flared up, okay? I'm far from being in the best mood to talk to suspects or victims right now."

"You really think she helped him kill?"

Will rubbed his face with the palm of his hand. "I'm not sure it can be called that. I... uh, I overreacted then" he even feels a little guilty now, remembering his outburst at the poor girl. "I don't think she was killing them with him. I think she was helping him catch them, that he was using her perception of family and fear for her own life for his own purposes. Beverly, she's been living in a nightmare, but she's not completely innocent and she's totally prone to manipulation" he says softly. "She needs... help from a specialist. From Alana, Hannibal, from anyone. She doesn't need to talk to me because it would be bad for both of us."

"What makes you think that?" Katz frowns his eyebrows slightly.

"Because when I'm around her, I feel like I'm being watched by her deceased daddy, and I don't really like it" he remarks, preparing material for the next lecture to keep himself occupied with something. "It makes me think of how Garrett Jacob Hobbs felt when he looked at her. Besides, she probably wants to talk to me just to tell me she's innocent, or to ask me not to say anything to Jack, or something - you can just tell her that I've put this case behind me and won't get involved in what's going on."

"Jack suspects her without you saying anything," Beverly sighs, crossing her arms over her chest. "He thinks she is the copycat."

"No, she's not" Will shakes his head confidently. "She's not a killer, she's a lure. You want my opinion? She should just be left alone. She's paid enough for her silence, and she can't be blamed for what she had to do - no more than you could blame a man stranded in the desert with no food or water for committing an act of cannibalism. When your... relative does something bad to others or even to you, the psyche can use any defense mechanism available to survive" he curved his lips, reluctantly remembering Margo and, by association, Mason.

Sometimes he wondered if he could even blame the girl for anything, and yet he came to the conclusion that he couldn't - just as he couldn't blame Abigail for helping her father. He needed to finally admit that all his aggression had only one object - and it was neither poor Abigail, nor the frightened-eyed Margo, nor the Hannibal trying to get inside his head, but Mason Verger himself. He thinks of him with irritation as he says goodbye to Beverly and is left alone, then takes off his glasses and looks up to the projector to review the slides of the presentation he's prepared for the next lecture. He presses a button at a fairly brisk pace, flipping through footage of the next maniac's victims, until suddenly the next slide has the odd, wrong kind of content - he sees Matthew there, strangled, dead pale, with his eyes staring up at the ceiling. Will's hands flinch and he blinks several times, but the illusion doesn't go away immediately, and he switches the slide, turning away abruptly, gulping for air, unprepared for the new hallucination; instead of a desk and a familiar classroom, he sees a room in some manor. Everything is immersed in a strange semi-darkness, and he tilts his head slightly to the side, taking a few steps towards the center of the room, in which stands the same richly antlered stag head on which the copycat victim was found a few days ago.

He hears footsteps beside him and turns his head, looking at a nastily smiling Mason. "I'm terribly sorry, but I'm afraid you have something I own," Verger says, and Will, feeling a surge of righteous anger, abruptly grabs him by the jacket and lifts him up with force, mounting him on the deer's head; the antlers pierce Mason's body, he opens his mouth, and blood runs down his body, staining his light-colored suit.

Graham straightens his back, looking down at him in disgust, and it's as if a wave of satisfaction runs through his body as he watches the life rapidly leave the dragon's body, when suddenly he realizes he's standing in a whole new place, in the dimly lit hallway of Dr. Lecter's office.

Chapter End Notes

If you wonder why Hannibal tries to convince Will that Matthew is in love with him despite his own feelings towards this sweaty profiler - its Hannibal, he has his own plan as always. You will understand his motives later I promise lol.

Chapter 11

There is a sound of the door opening. "Will?" Graham hears Hannibal's voice from behind; his body begins to shake, his hands tremble, and he stares lost at the room he's in, panic gripping him. Turning around a little sharply, he glances at Lecter with the same fright, looking somewhat puzzled. "I wasn't expecting you to come" he says and then frowns slightly, looking at his friend and must have finally noticing his condition.

After the invitation to come in, Will does so a little too abruptly, still shaking and panicking. "I don't know how I got here" he says, and the panic in his voice is very easy to hear.

"Your car is outside, so we know you drove here" Lecter tries to reply calmly.

"I, I, I literally was just getting ready for a lecture, got distracted for only a minute, no more - and now I'm here, and I don't remember anything!" he walks briskly around the office, certainly not feeling well. Hannibal watches him carefully, taking off his coat and putting it back on the coat rack. "No lecture, no ride here, absolutely nothing, it's like I woke up in your waiting room - except I wasn't asleep!"

"What were you distracted by?" Lecter asks with cautious interest.

"I was fantasizing about killing Mason - no, it was more like I was hallucinating it, against my will," Graham replies quickly and abruptly, too overwhelmed from all sides by emotion to control what exactly he's saying. "But it felt like one minute! One minute! But here I am, a few hours away from the academy, and now it's, I don't know, what - seven pm?"

Hannibal continues to eye him. "Eight, Will," he says, and Graham groans anguished, rubbing his face with both palms. "You've lost time."

"There's something wrong with me! I... I... this shouldn't be happening, this isn't normal, I know I'm crazy, but that's not how crazy I am" his voice shakes badly, as do his legs, and in an attempt to calm himself he buries a palm in his hair. "Did I… did I fall asleep and sleepwalk again? Why don't I remember falling asleep? Why don't I remember the lecture?"

Lecter tries not to get too close, lest he provoke Will into more panic. "Time loss can be a defensive reaction of the brain trying to cope with traumatic events or thoughts. You said you were hallucinating."

"Oh, right, another clue that something wrong is happening to me!" Will raises his voice, but it sounds more on the verge of tears than angry. He sits down on the couch, covering his face with both palms, trying to calm his breathing and the heart beating frantically in his chest. Graham gives himself a little time to come to his senses and realize all that has happened. "I'm sleepwalking. I'm hallucinating..." he swallows, catching those fragments of images from his memory again - Hobbs, Matthew, Mason, over and over and again and again and again, the blood changing to dead eyes and a cry of pain like his head is spinning. "I'm having time losses... maybe… maybe I should get a brain scan?"

"Will, don't look in the wrong corner for answers to this" Hannibal says confidently, stepping closer to him. "You said you had a hallucination before you dissociated. Tell me about that. What was going on before you experienced it, and what the hallucination itself was like?"

Will exhales nervously, running his gaze around the room, unable to find the strength to concentrate now, until he accidentally bumps his gaze on a statue of a deer. He squints and rubs his temples with his fingers. "I was talking to Beverly about Abigail, and it made me think of Margot and Mason, and then I was flipping through the slides for my lecture, and on one of them I... the picture distorted, and I saw Matthew strangled again. I turned around - and I wasn't in my office anymore, I was somewhere else, and there was this stag's head in the middle of the room, and Mason, and I grabbed him and put him on those antlers and watched him bleed to death like Cassie Boyle."

"Mason is Matthew's dragon?" Hannibal clarifies innocently, as if he hasn't realized everything yet. Will nods a few times, only then removing his palms from the face.

Lecter sighs, pressing his lips together, beginning to understand Graham's situation better than he ever has before. He now knows who Will wants to kill. Well, that makes things a lot easier.

"Everything that’s going on in your life right now is causing you a lot of stress, Will. You're empathizing with too many things at once - Matthew and the other victims on one side, their dragons on the other" Lecter notes. "The pressure is so intense that your forts are blown to pieces, and you lose control of your mind, and by extension, of time" he stops talking, pondering, then decides to help Will back to the present moment and test his theory at the same time. Hannibal steps back to his desk to grab a notepad and pen from there, then turns back to Graham. "There are certain exercises for such occasions. I want you to do something for me and for yourself, Will. So you could come to your senses" he says, holding out an open notepad to the confused man. "I need you to draw a clock face. A round clock. The small hand is the hour, the big hand is the minute. While you're drawing it, try to focus on who you are and where you are right now. It'll help."

Graham swallows and, even though he thinks it's a bit dumb, picks up a pen, glancing at his wristwatch, and begins to trace out the circle, numbers and hands with a slightly trembling hand. "It is eight twelve in the evening. I am in Baltimore, Maryland. My name is... Will Graham" he finishes the drawing and turns the notebook around, handing it along with the pen to Hannibal, exhaling heavily.

"Good" Lecter says, taking everything from his hands and lowering his gaze to the drawing. The numbers and arrows scattered across the sheet don't surprise him, only confirming the already obvious.

Will does feel more grounded in the moment, and because of that he begins to think more rationally, immediately remembering Matthew and jumping up from his seat, pulling out his phone but not seeing any missed calls there. He opens the messages and sees that he'd only answered Brown half an hour ago, letting him know that he'd be stopping at Hannibal's and would therefore be a little late; it feels absurd, and he can't remember why he was going to Hannibal's in the first place. Did he want to talk to him about something? But about what?

"I... I have to go, Dr. Lecter" he says in a slightly hoarse voice and forces himself to look at the psychiatrist. "Thank you," Will says quietly, and after a nod, he gets into his car just a couple minutes later, hoping that this time he won't just pass out behind the wheel. He's feeling much better, but he was feeling pretty normal right before he started switching slides for that presentation and just disappeared in time, so that was hardly an indicator. During the drive to the Wolf Trap, he glances at his watch several times, repeating aloud like a mantra - *it's this time, I'm there, my name is Will Graham. And I'm not crazy.*

As he approached the threshold of his house, he wondered whether he should tell Matthew what had happened, and in the end he decided not to give the man a new reason to worry, because he had enough to worry about already. So he takes a deep breath and walks into the house, ready to pretend everything is fine.

He has no loss of time after that, so he concludes that it was probably really caused by stress. A few days of peace seems like a gift from heavens, but all good things come to an end sooner or later, and Will can only sigh heavily, taking off his glasses, when Jack Crawford shows up at his door right after a lecture, reporting a new body they believe to be killed by the Copycat Killer. At first Graham doesn't understand how the agent came to this conclusion, but then he learns the first details and feels goose bumps at the realization that Jack may be right.

The body of another catboy is found not in his own bedroom, like the bodies of the victims of the real Tail Taker, but on display. This time it's not a field kabuki, no - more like a shore kabuki, since the body was found by the river. It wasn't hooked on stag's head, instead it was lying on the sand surrounded by flowers, mimicking one of Botticelli's paintings of the mythical story of the origin of cat people. He was missing an ear and part of his tail, and, as Will managed to hear from Price, a liver.

But what was far more important, the victim's name was *Nicholas Boyle.*

And yet, despite the kinship of the two victims, Graham felt that wasn't the case at all. Just a coincidence - or, rather, a choice made on the basis of greater convenience. Why take a long time to choose meat on the shelf at the store when you can grab the one lying next to the one you just picked up? Especially when it's so perfectly suited to your design.

I look at what everyone else is doing and bring it to the point of art. I expose what they're hiding. I take away organs - because they don't deserve them. I feel nothing more than disgust and intense contempt for these people. There is no desperation in my murders - I'm calm, organized, intelligent and that's why I'm hard to catch. It reminds Will of the Ripper - but why would he copy someone else's creations? Besides, the last series of murders wasn't that long ago, and he hasn't broken the cycle before.

Still, something wasn't right.

Will stands up, straightening up, looking at the corpse in front of him with a slight frown. *Who are you doing this for? You're addressing these murders, but to whom? The public? The FBI? Other killers? Are you issuing a challenge? Attracting attention? Who are you? What are you? Why?*

Why are you so hard to see when you expose yourself so prominently?

Why are you screaming at me?

"...Besides the flowers, there's something else here" he suddenly hears Zeller's voice catching his attention. "Pebbles. It's hidden beneath the buds, but it's like it's scattered on purpose as if it's showing a path up, see?" he asks, pushing aside some flowers carefully, and Will frowns as he looks at it.

"A trail of white pebbles," he says quietly. "There'll be breadcrumbs next time."

"And then what, a gingerbread house and a cannibalistic witch?" Beverly asks.

"Two cannibals in a month? Come on, I just managed to finally force myself to eat sausage yesterday" Zeller complains.

"With our work, it's better to become vegetarians" Price remarks.

"He's leading us somewhere" Will frowns, looking at the path of pebbles.

Beverly, squatting near where the pebbles ended, cautiously examines them and what's underneath, but Graham knows she won't find anything there. It was a metaphor, this maniac isn't the type to act in such a straightforward manner. Art for art's sake, hidden meanings for hidden meanings - and at the same time, not quite. Inside Will, something keeps whispering that there's something wrong here. He presses his lips together, shifting his gaze from the pebbles to Nicholas Boyle's head near the end of the path, and thinks about it while only superficially listening to the crew's conversations.

"…his girlfriend says he never came home from work yesterday" Jack says, finishing talking to someone on the phone, and sighs. "He was a stable boy at the Verger's farm. I guess that's where he was last seen."

Will, who had been staring at the body until then, suddenly loses focus, and everything in front of his eyes goes blurry and it's like lightning strikes his spine. His gaze races over the blurred spots, his lips open, and anxiety twists in his chest as if wrapping barbed wire around his lungs. His throat goes dry when, still not looking anywhere, he asks hoarsely, "Where?" in a lost and shocked voice.

"At the Verger’s farm in Wolf Trap" Crawford answers calmly and frowns a bit, tilting his head, noticing Graham's reaction. "Will?"

The profiler rises to his feet, his gaze not focusing on anything in particular, feeling the lack of oxygen inside. His lips twitch as he steps away from the body on unsteady legs, feeling himself drowning in the Mariana Trench itself. He doesn't respond to the team's questions because he can't hear them, and a sharp pain pierces his head, making him squeeze his eyes shut and stick his hand in his pocket to pull out an aspirin. He opens it without looking, trying to sprinkle a few pills into his palm, but ends up scattering them, and opens his eyes, startled again when he realizes that it's noticeably darker, and the white pieces of aspirin are lying at his feet on the steps of his porch.

He begins to shake and feel himself sweating and the bottle falls from his hands, and then he sits up, feeling like he might fall or pass out at any moment, and wraps his arms around himself, feeling a sharp chill. He hears dogs whimpering, and then the door ajar and Matthew's worried voice calling his name. Will can't respond.

Brown stares at him in utter confusion for about a minute, trying to get a word out of him, and then does step out, walking over to the man and placing a hand gently on his shoulder, feeling how badly Graham is shaking. "Oh my god... Will? What's wrong? Will?" he looks into his face, and seeing his condition, squeezes his shoulder a little harder. "Hey, it's okay, it's okay, you're home, I'm here... let's go inside, come on" he helps him to his feet and almost drags him into the house, closing the door, leaving the bottle with a couple pills lying on the steps. Feeling more secure within the four walls of the living room surrounded by dogs, Matthew stops, wrapping his palms around Will's burning face and trying to look into his eyes. Graham seems to be coming to his senses quite a bit - at least he finds the strength to focus his gaze on Brown. "Hey, it's okay. Just look at me. Yeah, like that. Good job" he tries to smile to cheer Will up, but the man continues to shake, and after a couple moments he pulls away from him abruptly. "Will-"

"Do you know Nicholas Boyle?" Graham asks, nervously stepping away from him and staying at the other end of the room, subconsciously afraid of hurting Brown amidst his emotions right now and therefore trying to keep a distance.

Matthew blinks confusedly. "I don't... I don't know, I'm… not sure. Should I?"

"Light brown hair, slightly curly, ears, tail - he worked at Mason's stable," Will explains in a nervous, quick voice.

"Nick?" Matthew raises his eyebrows.

"Yes! Why didn't you mention him?" Graham asks, pacing around the living room, frowning slightly, still not quite calming his breathing.

"I... I didn't think it could be anything important, we talked like, uh, once, and… and Mason called him too mediocre to get his attention" the young man replies, swishing his tail, frowning. "Wait, why are you even asking about that?"

"Nicholas Boyle was found dead this morning" Will replies, finally stopping circling the room, calming down slightly after another loss of time, switching the center of his attention. "He's the new victim of the Copycat."

Matthew blinks confusedly, trying to collate all the information in his head. "You think the Copycat has something to do with Mason?" he surmises.

"No, no," Graham shakes his head, rubbing his forehead. "But it's like... his murders are like something gift-wrapped just for me" he sighs and decides to correct himself, "or for someone who'll notice. Who'll be the first to realize. It's... pebbles or bread crumbs he leaves behind."

Brown looks at him thoughtfully, still not daring to break the distance Will has created by staying in his place. "Is that why you were so baffled on the porch?" he asks a little

uncertainly.

Will swallows, shaking his head, and licks his lips. "I lost time again."

"What? What do you mean *lost*? What do you mean *again*?"

"I was on the shore, near his body, talking to Jack, and I got a headache, and I blinked, and opened my eyes here on the doorstep of my home," he says quickly in a nervous tone, avoiding a direct look at Matthew and feeling the partial return of panic. "The first time I missed the trip from Quantico to Baltimore. Was in the lecture hall, then," he makes a snap of his fingers, "I'm in the Hannibal's waiting room. That was a couple days ago."

"And you didn't tell me anything?" Matthew asks surprised and a little disgruntled, but then bites his lip, only waving his tail irritably and looking away for a couple moments before frowning at Will again. "What did Hannibal say about that? You told him about all your symptoms, didn't you? What does he think?"

"He thinks this is just… overexertion or some kind of... I don't know, something mental," Graham replies. "Some kind of reaction to excessive stress and a side effect of my empathy. He advised rest and told me to draw a clock, some sort of exercise to ground myself in the moment."

Matthew frowns and blinks a few times. "A clock?" he asks, immediately remembering his time as a patient in a mental hospital. There, he shared a room with a guy who had a problem with time, perhaps even worse than Will's. Before his unexpected discharge, as he was packing up to move to another hospital, he told him that it was all "because of the clock test," that he had drawn it "somehow wrong," and had a brain scan revealing encephalitis. Brown reflects on his suspicions, which he decided to put aside a few days ago, seemingly all in vain. "And how did it look like?"

"What do you mean?" Will asks, stopping again, ceasing to pace the room.

"Well... were it... normal?" Matthew clarifies carefully. Graham looks at him incomprehensibly.

"Yeah? It's just an exercise."

Brown nods uncertainly, licking his lips. After thinking for a moment, he goes into the kitchen, grabbing one of the post-its and a pencil from the fridge, and returns to Will. "Why don't you do it now then? It helped last time, didn't it? Please."

Will stares at him incredulously for a couple seconds, but then sighs, only rolling his eyes slightly, and takes everything from his hands, stepping back to the table to fulfill his request. "My name is Will Graham. It's... seven forty pm, shit... I'm in Wolf Trap, Virginia, in my house. And I'm drawing dumb clocks again" he puts the pencil down abruptly and hands the post-it back to Matthew, rubbing his face with his palms.

Brown freezes, looking at the crooked drawing and swallows, covering his eyes before raising them to the man. He tries to find the right words, afraid he'll only scare Graham more.

"Will... I, uh...I think you need a brain scan."

"Yeah, I said the same thing to Hannibal, but he said I was looking for the answer in the wrong corner" Graham replies, going to the kitchen for a glass of water.

Matthew blinks. He stays in place for another moment before coming to his senses and rushing to follow Will. "So he... he doesn't think it's necessary?" he asks, and Graham nods, taking a sip of water, resting his lower back on the tabletop. Brown opens his mouth, thinking about it, and then swallows, looking at the man again. "Okay, Will, I'm going to have a slightly odd request for you" he begins, "but I want you to get a brain scan and not tell Hannibal about it."

Graham blinks confusedly, looking at him in incomprehension. "What, why?"

Matthew takes a step closer to him, looking him in the eye. "Will..." he licks his lips, trying to find the right words. *"Will, I don't think Hannibal is good for you"* Brown exhales.

Will looks at him questioningly, feeling a shiver run down his spine. He remembered all too well that Margot had said roughly the same thing to Matthew about the job that had turned out to be a nightmare for him. "What makes you say that?"

"I... I think, uh… I think you have encephalitis, Will," when he says that, Graham opens his lips confusedly, as if about to say something. "And I think he thinks so too, but for some unknown reason he doesn't tell you about it, ignoring all the symptoms. You've got fever, headaches, you're sweating profusely, you're sleepwalking, you're experiencing hallucinations, you're losing track of time... if I'm right, it could get worse soon, you'll start having seizures - what if one happens while you're driving? Will, it's dangerous, if it's encephalitis, you need to start treatment as soon as it possible!" he takes him by the shoulders, looking him in the eyes.

Will feels confused, cornered. He tries to make sense out of the young man's words. His gaze becomes fleeing once more. "But why would he...?"

"I don't know," Matthew says quietly, moving his palms to his cheeks, stroking his face. "I don't know, Will" he shakes his head, looking into his eyes, his voice remaining calm, he's trying to convince the man to calm down now as well. "But I do know that you need to get checked out by a doctor, and soon."

Will looks into his green eyes, feeling devastated and overwhelmed at the same time. He sensed something was wrong with Hannibal, but he still couldn't figure out what it was, and all the more inaccessible to his understanding were his motives. Why would he keep his suspicions quiet and indirectly lead Will further away from the thought of seeing a doctor?

He takes a deep breath, trying to calm himself, and swallows, nodding nervously, still breaking eye contact with Matthew, unable to sustain it for too long. "Okay," he says after a few moments of silence, his voice barely louder than a whisper. "I'll go see the doctor tomorrow."

Matthew nods in agreement and gives him a supportive smile, stroking his stubbled cheeks with his thumbs before reaching forward and touching his forehead with his own, covering his eyes. "It's going to be okay, Will," he whispers with conviction. "I'll be here for you."

Will reflexively closes his eyes too, feeling better now, so close to Brown. He doesn't care right now about the thoughts of the signs of love and affection Lecter spoke of in one of their last sessions; even if it was true, he knew he was beginning to feel something just as warm toward the young man himself, and he couldn't find the strength to say no to this and pull away, to break the fragile cup of his trust. Trust. Did he trust Hannibal? He could almost say with certainty that he didn't, yet at the same time there was something about the man that made him open up to him like a tin can with a knife. But he knew Matthew was right; something wasn't right with Hannibal and it would have to be dealt with as soon as possible. Not that he cared about the moral of the matter (why would Hannibal hide something so important from him?), he rather wished to understand ***why*** he was doing it. Something inside told him that motive was the most important piece of the puzzle here, that without it the whole picture would be wrong, incomplete, no matter how diligently he put the other pieces together. His head continued to ache, and it made it hard to think straight, and he exhaled heavily, swallowing. "I've missed a few hours. Whatever I've been doing this whole time, but I sure haven't been eating," he joked a little painfully, but Matthew grinned anyway, pulling back from him after a couple moments, catching the hint.

"Very good, because I made pasta" he proclaims, raising one finger up, spinning on his axis and rushing over to the stove where the hot pot of food still stood. Opening the lid, he makes sure of it, and then looks at Will with a dose of irony. "I think I should take the time to learn how to cook something else, don't I?"

Matthew switched from disturbing topics to jokes and routine so easily that Graham couldn't resist it, smiling weakly at his words, only facing his tense thoughts again when already standing alone under the shower. He worried about what he might have done in those few hours he couldn't remember now, but even more worried that he might lose time again tomorrow when it came time to visit the Vergers regarding the murder that had been committed - as he understood from the messages he'd checked, he'd agreed to Jack's request to visit them and ask a few questions.

He wasn't sure if it would be a smart decision to take his gun there with him.

Chapter 12

Will was supposed to go to the Vergers' house around lunchtime - Jack had messaged him hat Margot was ready to meet him from noon until three. Therefore he was able to get a good night's sleep and spend some time in bed in the morning, watching the still-sleeping Matthew beside him. He had a relaxed expression on his face, and only occasionally his ear flicked up showing that he was dreaming. He was breathing quietly, lying on a nearby pillow, only his hand resting on Will's chest. Graham suddenly felt a little awkward - he was sweating in his sleep again, the gray fabric was soaked through in a couple of places, and he probably didn't smell very nice. Matthew looked like a beautiful angel in comparison, with his lips slightly ajar and a pleasant scent that Will couldn't get enough of. He wanted to spend the whole day like this, but he couldn't, and the dogs were already starting to wake up, judging by the noise from the first floor. Graham sighed, lifting his hand hesitantly and taking Matthew's palm to gently remove it from his body, but the young man woke up anyway, starting to toss and turn under the covers before he sighed. Will, sitting with his back to him and looking over his shoulder, watches as he slowly comes to his senses, swallowing and opening his eyes. They collide glances, and Brown smiles lazily. "You know, if you sleep without a shirt, you won't have to do laundry every day" he remarks in a slightly hoarse post-sleep voice.

Will snorts with a slight smile, turning away and getting out of bed. "Just admit you're trying to get me naked" he jokes, taking off his t-shirt and throwing it in the laundry basket. His legs are still a little sore from a night walk a couple days ago, and it hurts.

Matthew mumbles indefinitely in response. "Okay, you got me" he breaks out into a grin, tilting his head and rubbing his ear and cheek against the pillow, continuing to watch Graham until he leaves his sight, heading for the bathroom. Brown yawns and stretches out on the bed, noticing Max sleeping next to it and scratching him between the ears, hanging his arm off the bed.

Like every morning before, he comes down ten minutes later to make breakfast while Will walks the dogs. He used to skip breakfast a lot, even before he got to Mason's, but now he felt the urge to take care of Graham. When he was a kid, grandpa used to joke that cat people actually all struggle with a wild inner desire to catch, kill, and bring prey like a mouse or bird to their significant other's feet, instead opting for a more humane and appropriate method of courtship like cooking. He had always thought it was very foolish, but now he was actually catching himself making sure Will was always fed whenever possible.

He wasn't sure if the man understood his signs of attention, but he was okay with the way things were going now anyway. Maybe he secretly wanted to feel his kiss on his lips, or his touch crossing the boundaries Will had been so careful to respect; he thought it would bring him closer to him, and finally get rid of Mason's phantom nasty touch on his body. Graham was a peace, a safe place, someone who understood and sympathized with him without seeing him as something pathetic. He liked it, and he began to get nervous every time he thought about the future, about the possibility that someday he might have to move on and Will would ask him to leave, abandoning him to live his lonely life. It was an irrational feeling for a lot of reasons, and he understood that, but he couldn't get rid of it altogether. In

fact, after all, his future could turn out to be much worse if circumstances didn't work out in their favor; he'd long had the pulling feeling that he was living in this paradise on borrowed time, and that soon he'd wake up in his cold little cell, covered in a blanket that smelled like Mason, and never get a chance to smell Will's comforting scent again. The thought about it alone devastated him, and he wanted to get rid of it.

He presses his lips together, trying to shake off the tension when he hears the door open and the commotion of several dogs. It turns out to be easy enough to do, because this whole pleasant routine felt like home, like he'd always been here, along with Graham, for as long as he'd known himself at all. He tries not to think about his recent nightmare where Mason's men set this place on fire, locking Will and the dogs inside. It was just a bad dream. Life can be terribly unfair sometimes, but how could it do that to someone as good as Will? Matthew would rather burn himself to keep him from suffering like this.

"I'm going to see a doctor after work" Graham tells him at breakfast while Brown butters his toast. "I think I'll ask Alana to recommend me someome. She has a lot of friends who work at the hospital" he sighs, feeling weird planning something like that. But he decides to talk about it so he doesn't talk about going to the Verger estate in a couple hours - although he didn't like lying and understatement, he figured he wouldn't mention those plans unless Matthew asked about them directly. Still, it might make Brown nervous, and he didn't want to put that extra stress on the young man.

"Cool. Who's Alana?" Matthew asks, chewing on a piece of toast with genuine innocent interest.

"She's a coworker of mine. She teaches at the academy. She's a... friend?" Will replies uncertainly; he'd always had a hard time defining such things concerning himself. He wasn't sure what Bloom thought about them, but he knew for sure that she wouldn't refuse to help him if he needed anything, even though he hadn't asked her for anything ever before.

"You said you didn't have any friends," Matthew remarks without accusation, eyeing Graham.

"I... I guess it depends on what the definition of friendship is" Will sighs, looking down at his plate, and shrugs. "We talk. Sometimes. Once a week, maybe... never been alone with her. She... distances herself so I don't think she's analyzing me, I guess."

Matthew nods thoughtfully, pondering this information. "Are we friends?" he asks suddenly, eating another forkful of scrambled eggs.

Will feels a bit anxious and confused by this question, and he drifts his gaze away towards the window, trying to quickly gather his thoughts for the right answer. "We're... definitely something" he says, and then still slips a casual glance to Matthew's eyes, seeing only slight amusement at that answer. "It's complicated. We do talk quite a lot. We spend time together. Sleep in the same bed. But we've known each other for a little over a week. I don't know how to define that" he says honestly.

"Oh my God, we are roommates" Matthew replies in a playfully agitated whisper, and Will rolls his eyes. He's about to say something else, but suddenly the dogs start barking towards

the windows and both men tense up in an instant. Graham frowns slightly, not understanding who could have come to his house at this hour, and silently stands up, cautiously approaching the window to look out, and doesn't immediately recognize the car stopped outside his house. It is only when the driver's door opens that he sees Hannibal, and that, while it calms him down considerably, still leaves only more questions.

"It's Hannibal" Will says, stepping away from the window. Matthew frowns a little confused looking at him, not quite sure what to do. "I... maybe it has something to do with something that happened during the last time I lost time" he licks his lips nervously before still frowning slightly walking towards the front door, which he carefully opens, looking out into the street uncertainly. He still looks confused as he meets the gaze of the approaching Hannibal. "Dr. Lecter?"

"Will" he smiles slightly, quite friendly and polite as always in his perfectly fitting expensive suit, coat and scarf. His hair is only slightly ruffled by the wind. He notices that Graham isn't dressed for the street yet and checks his wristwatch. "I apologize, I'm ten minutes earlier than we agreed - didn't time it right."

"Agreed?" clarifies Will awkwardly, not knowing exactly where to look; he tries to stare into Lecter's eyes for a few moments, but his gaze slips to his neck.

Hannibal bows his head slightly, as if not understanding for the first few seconds Graham's condition. "Yes. Yesterday you asked me to go with you to the Vergers. You wanted me to drive you, since you were unsure of your readiness to go there alone" he reminds him, beginning to guess what this is all about.

The man nods a little awkwardly, realizing that Lecter's words make sense. "I... sorry Dr. Lecter, I've lost time again... I should probably start journaling everything I do and say in detail" Will remarks, smiling crookedly and sighing. He recalls Matthew's warning that Hannibal is not to be trusted, that the man is deliberately discouraging him from seeing a doctor for some reason, but even now he can't figure out why he would do that. He looks confident and only slightly disturbed by Will's words.

"I see" he looks into Graham's face a little wistfully. "I think we should discuss this while we're on our way to the Vergers. I take it you're not ready to go out yet. Can I come in, or should I wait for you here?" asks Lecter politely.

Will hesitantly opens his mouth, about to say that he doesn't know if that would be a good idea, but immediately hears the sound of Matthew's footsteps hurrying up to the second floor. This causes him to sigh. "Well, I suppose you can" he replies, shrugging and letting Hannibal into the house.

Lecter has heard the noise as well. As he enters, he decides to comment on it nonetheless, seeing no point in pretending he didn't know anything about Brown - there was no one to pretend to in that regard. "He doesn't really like visitors, does he?" he asks, turning his gaze upward. "I suppose he has his reasons."

Will closes the door and rubs his neck awkwardly. "I... I need to talk to him before I go. Stay here" he asks before heading for the stairs to get his things from the bedroom and find

Matthew.

Hannibal takes the opportunity and, left alone with the dogs looking curiously and warily at him slightly from the sidelines, looks around Will's house. He notices a piano and a table with an unfinished lure, many books in a closet, and a chess board lying on a table in the living room. There is a forgotten breakfast for two left unfinished in the kitchen, looking rather unremarkable to his strictly personal taste. He begins to think of an excuse he could think of to feed Will (well, maybe Matthew too - why not?) a proper dinner after all. Stopping at the base of the stairs, he sniffs a bit, recognizing the smell of pheromones that had settled on the furniture around him under the influence of the young man who had been here for quite some time. It reminds Hannibal suddenly of his childhood, of the smell of Mischa, whom he used to hug when they were trying to keep warm on a frosty night. It makes him sentimental, and he hastily shrugs these associations away, returning closer to the dogs.

Will, meanwhile, walks into the bedroom, where Matthew is sitting on the edge of the bed with a cup of coffee in his hands, a little nervously and with a slightly, seemingly disgruntled look. "Hey," Graham calls to him softly, somehow feeling guilty for having an intruder in the house. Brown looks up at him, meeting his faint smile. "It seems I asked him to go along on a work-related trip yesterday."

"I heard what he said," Matthew says softly, dropping his gaze into his cup again. "You didn't say you were going to the Vergers" remarks a slightly nervous Brown, clearly trying to control his inner emotions.

Will, realizing what this is really about, sighs, coming closer and sitting down next to him on the bed. "I didn't want you to worry. It's about Nicholas' murder, and I don't think anything bad is going to happen. I guess that's why I asked Hannibal to come with me, to make sure that... that I wouldn't shoot Mason after seeing him" he smiles nervously, but only for a moment, immediately looking tensely at Matthew again.

The young man stares into his face, as if trying to read his mind, and hesitantly opens his mouth a few times, about to say something, but stops himself before the right question finally forms in his head. "You want to kill Mason?" he asks a little uncertainly, keeping an attentive look on his face. "For me...?" his question sounds timid, and Will stares into his eyes, feeling too many emotions at once, probably a good half of them taking over from Matthew.

The young man's words make him look inside himself for a suitable answer. Will knew that the depths of his own darkness weren't something he could unload on Matthew, not now, but he wanted him to understand, to see the lengths he would go to protect those he cared about. And he wanted Brown to feel that he cared about him, for it had long since been something he could deny. Their recent dialog hangs in the air. What are they to each other? Friends? Will thinks of a better way to put it now: they're tied together, and with every movement and new word they say, with every warm touch and soft look, the thread around them tightens only more, and the farther apart they are, the more painful everything becomes, as if his heart is about to be torn by that shrinking thread.

He licks his parched lips and lowers his gaze timidly, then reaches out tentatively for his palm, covering it gently with his own and squeezing it very lightly, stroking the pale skin

with his thumb, knowing that touch is important to Matthew, that it is a language of its own, able to show more deeply what is hidden between the lines, used to add strength to each letter and each word said. "I want to protect you" he finally says, and his voice is barely louder than a whisper, intimate in this room, a secret shared only between two, "and sometimes I think killing Mason is the only way to do this. And that... makes me imagine cruel things that I'm not proud of." He hears Matthew's quiet breathing in the stillness of this room, and lifts his gaze to his moist eyes. "But I'm not a killer, Matthew. I can't..."

Brown's other hand suddenly touches his cheek, gently, carefully, and the young man's lips curve into a soft smile. They look into each other's eyes, and then Matthew covers his, leaning forward and touching Will's forehead with his own. Graham feels his heart quicken, but he covers his eyes too, letting that touch happen. "I know," Brown says softly, "you don't have to do this. I'm... just grateful that you want to do this for me, even if you won't. I don't want you destroying yourself trying to take care of me, Will. I'm a big boy" he pulls away quite slightly, looking into Graham's eyes with a warm smirk. "And I want to take care of you, too. You're... you're like home to me, Will. I don't want you to burn down."

The silent confession hangs in the air; their faces are so close together now that a kiss seems inevitable. Will wants to move forward, to touch the young man's pale lips gently and warmly, and he senses that Matthew longs for it, too, thinks only of it at this moment, but instead of fulfilling their shared desire, Graham pulls away, averting his gaze and rising from the bed. He doesn't want to do this.

Not right now.

He can't imagine how he'd feel if some couple hours later, having forgotten everything, he read a short note in his phone, something like *"please don't forget that I kissed Matthew; I did it because it felt right, because my heart was beating intensely in my chest in painful unison with his heart, and just the mere sight of his green eyes, so bright, almost see-through, evoked so many feelings in me at once that it's impossible to list them all, but all of them must tell only one thing - I fell in love with him, and I never thought I would feel something like this, but here I am, with my chest open, with the flowers of love sprouting in my body, and it's like a fire that consumes me; Matthew said he didn't want me to burn, but I'm burning right now because of him, and I'm warm, god, how warm I am... "*

Brown lowers his gaze, feeling awkward, being rejected even though so gently, for he doesn't understand Will's motives. "I'm sorry" he says quietly, feeling the red spots blooming on his pale skin. He's sorry he let himself dump his feelings and thoughts on Graham, but it seemed so right in this moment; a confession in exchange for a confession, isn't that fair? He licked his lips nervously and buried his fingers in his hair to soothe himself by scratching behind an ear.

Will, quickly gathering his thoughts, turns back to him, looking at his lowered head and the hand in his hair, and sighs, not sure he's ready to explain everything now, but at the same time not wanting to leave Brown like this until later. "No, I'm sorry, Matthew," he sighs, licking his lips and shaking his head. "Hey," he smiles softly, intonation prompting Brown to raise his gaze to him; the extent to which the young man looks awkward and guilty almost hurts Will. "I'll come back tonight and we'll talk about it, okay? " he says, and then realizes that he

doesn't sound particularly reassuring, rather the opposite, and Graham is once again convinced that social interaction is a torture, and he decides it would be easier to show his support by touching, so, remembering Hannibal's words (and a couple of online articles he's read since; the first time in years that he'd felt the need to delete his browser history to save himself from unnecessary embarrassment), Will leaned down to rest his forehead on Matthew's, covering his eyes for a few moments before pulling away from him, brushing the young man's hair. Straightening up, he looks down at him with a faint smile. "I'll be back in an hour and a half to get my car and drive to work. I can text you beforehand so you can put the kettle on and we can have some tea" he offers and Brown, looking at him like he's watching fireworks, smiles slightly and nods. His dilated pupils, which almost completely fill the light-colored iris, seem almost hypnotic, and it takes Will an effort to turn away from them and walk out of the room.

He finds Lecter right where he left him, though he doubts that the man has really been near the door this whole time. A couple of dogs sniff him with interest, and only Max stands at the other end of the room, looking tensely at Hannibal; Will thinks that the dog seems to have grown attached to Matthew very quickly, too, and now reflected his anxieties in his behavior. In fact, it sometimes seemed to Graham that Max already loved Brown more than himself, the man who had saved him from starvation a couple years ago, but he didn't mind that and actually even felt some warmth at the thought. He liked the fact that while he wasn't home, there was someone here who was sure to protect Matthew at all costs. It was comforting.

Putting on his outerwear, Will followed Hannibal outside, heading for his car. The man tactfully decided not to ask about Brown just yet, instead returning to the topic they had left behind.

"How many hours did you lose yesterday?" he asks, approaching the car.

Graham licks his lips, shrugging uncertainly and looking away as he opens the door on his side. "I don't remember anything from the moment I stood on the shore near another copycat victim to the moment I stood here. So about... five or six hours."

"More than last time," Hannibal remarks and gets into his Bentley with him. "And you were trying to escape from your shocking thoughts again. What shocked you so much about this murder, Will?"

The man sighs, mentally going back to the moment his narrative cut short. "It wasn't the murder that shocked me. It was Nicholas Boyle's connection to the Vergers that did it" he replies and licks his lips, looking a little glumly at the roadside. "I get the feeling it's another gift just for me, like it was with Cassie Boyle. Except that then he wanted to nudge me toward understanding Shrike, and now... to pave for me the road to the witch's house from the fairy tale."

Lecter stares at him thoughtfully for a couple moments, feeling a slight dose of admiration for the man's intelligence, before he starts to watch the road again. "Perhaps he knows what Mason did. Or at least assumes" he says, and then, after thinking about it, decides to reveal something to Will, since he didn't seem to remember being in the FBI lab and not getting any new information about what was done to Nicholas. "So you don't remember anything from the time you were on shore?" he asks, giving Graham a quick glance. "I guess in that case I

should elaborate on what you told me when you met me in Baltimore - it will, I think, be important for the conversation with Margot" Hannibal says and Will, frowning slightly, looks at him in tense anticipation of continuing. "You told me that there were some lacerations found on Nicholas Boyle's back, inflicted some time before his death" he looks at Graham again. "And it's unlikely that the Copycat did this."

Graham opens his lips, realizing what Lecter has said, and leans back in his chair, taking a deep breath so he doesn't start to get too nervous. His jaw tenses as he nods and purses his lips, feeling the anger inside him. "Matthew said that Mason didn't find Nick interesting enough" he says, "apparently that changed when his favorite toy got away. He must be just furious right now" Will snorts.

Hannibal was thoughtfully silent for a moment. Graham had actually told him about it on emotion when they'd met in his lecture hall after class, but Lecter had certainly known about Nicholas's wounds long before that. Killing him for the sake of Will's becoming, he'd noticed the many lacerations on his lower back and shoulder blades, and while he wasn't sure if Matthew had the same ones when Graham had picked him up off the curb, the thought of it seemed pretty obvious. When he and Will had talked, he'd said it would be funny if Nicholas had the same branding with the Verger surname as Brown. It wasn't hard to figure out that the young man was branded like a pig; Mason had so far given Lecter the impression of an extremely uncultured individual, who himself would do well to be turned into a pig - and into pork. But he was willing to wait, so as not to deprive Will of his rebirth and revenge. Though he couldn't deny that it was better if this becoming happened as soon as possible, before something too irreparable happened. That was why he was helping Will along the way, standing behind him and nudging him in the right direction with his rich deer antlers.

"What will you do if you see him today?" Hannibal asks, not taking his eyes off the road, turning toward the Verger's territory. He notices how close the estate really is to Will's house, and can't help but wonder how Matthew still hasn't been found. Either it was simple luck, or Mason actually knew perfectly well where the young man was, in which case he was just waiting for the right moment to take what he believes is his. If Hannibal were in his place, though, he would have done the same thing - let the man feel something good first, freedom, safety, maybe even love - so that he could then take it all away from him and destroy him entirely. There would be more pleasure in that than in taking the man to himself right away.

He was curious if Will was considering such a scenario as well.

"Given my previous experience of the last few days, I think I'll just lose time again," Graham grinned unhappily.

"What appears to you to be a chasm between two points in time is actually an unfamiliar forest. You don't remember walking through it like a blindfolded traveler, but you were" Hannibal remarks. "As I've had time to ascertain, you're behaving quite normally while passing through that chasm."

"Well, glad to hear I don't have a split personality" Will notes. "Well, probably" he adds less confidently, and then sighs, looking out the window and seeing the gates of the estate. They bear the emblem of the Verger family, the same one that's branded on Matthew's body.

He presses his lips together, less and less sure that this is going to end well.

Chapter 13

They were led through the corridors and halls of the Verger estate, and Will couldn't escape the intrusive thought that just less than a month ago Matthew had walked those same corridors, locked up, tortured, accompanied, perhaps, by this same guard. He'd been looking at the same fuchsia-colored walls, the same strange, exquisite statuettes, the same strange paintings, some of them portraits of family members and others strange works of art depicting blood and flesh from the slaughterhouse. At times, though, it seemed to Will that some of these monstrous paintings were simply his hallucination, inspired by the horrifying image of Mason in his head. He sighs, averting his gaze, but the thoughts never go anywhere. He stares at the red carpet beneath his feet and wonders if it's hiding the drops of blood on it, covering up the indelible puddles beneath it.

They are left waiting in the hall in front of Margo's office, and Will remembers that Matthew was sitting here as well; looking around the room, he somehow feels he knows which chair he found his seat in, and sits down in it. He doesn't relax back, but leans forward slightly, biting his lip, looking around. There's a painting directly across the room, and Will frowns at it; he thinks he's seen it somewhere before, but he's never been so absorbed in art to distinguish one artist from another.

"The Crucifixion of Saint Wilgefortis from Bosch's triptych," Hannibal says aloud, and Will looks away from the painting, glancing at the man pensively examining it. He looks in the same direction again. "Quite a good copy," he says.

"I wonder what they have hanging in the dining room" Graham wrinkles his nose slightly. The thought crosses his mind that Matthew must have been looking at that painting then, too, engrossed in thoughts of the upcoming job interview, also waiting for the door to open and for him to be invited in to see the very Ms. Verger he was so eager to impress. Will sighs, tilting his head and rubbing his face with both palms, when suddenly he thinks he hears a meow mixed with someone's whisper, seemingly coming from just behind the wall beside him. He flinches, looking around confused, and it doesn't escape Lecter's attention.

The man tilts his head to the side. "Will?" he calls out cautiously.

Will looks lost and still hears the strange sounds. "Do you hear that?" he asks slightly louder than a whisper. Hannibal is silent for a couple moments, listening, but expectantly hears nothing, and only shakes his head slightly, looking at Graham with a slight frown. Suddenly it's like someone cries out as if from a blow, and Will gets to his feet abruptly, looking alarmed and staring back at the sound.

Hannibal stops him gently, taking him by the shoulder as he was about to walk over to the door a couple steps away from them. "Will, there's no sound. Just footsteps somewhere in the distance and security talking outside the window" he says, trying to look into his eyes that are almost painfully restless right now.

"But..." Graham starts, but then bites his lip, looking behind his back with a mixture of pain and bitterness towards the place where the sounds came from just a moment ago. He sighs, somehow feeling ashamed as he lowers his gaze. "I thought I heard someone's voice and screams" he says quietly before looking up into Hannibal's eyes. "Is there some sort of exercise for that kind of cases?" his voice is slightly sarcastic, but he doesn't have time to get Lecter's reaction to his words as the door to Margo's office finally opens and they are invited in.

Will walks ahead, adjusting his glasses on the bridge of his nose. He notices a carafe of some sort of alcohol on a table against the wall, and then moves his gaze to the chairs across from the proprietress' desk. After thinking only a moment, he decides to sit in the left seat closer to the door, remembering that Matthew had always tended to lie and sit at his left. This feels right.

"Hello, Ms. Verger" Hannibal proves to be expectedly more collected and calm than he is, maintaining all the rules of decorum. "I'm Dr. Hannibal Lecter and this is Special Agent Will Graham, we're from the FBI."

Will finally stops his gaze on Margot, looking into her frightened round eyes. He would hardly have noticed it if he hadn't been looking deliberately; he usually tried to avoid eye contact, whereas Matthew was interested in the eyes of others as if he could read a person's mind through them, gauge their level of danger. Maybe he really could. Will had no interest in the details and was only glad that Brown was finding comfort in his blue eyes. Because of the young man, he was now looking for answers in people's eyes too, though he still didn't often hold his gaze longer than a couple seconds, dropping it lower in the end.

Margo assesses him and Lecter in return for only a couple moments, then decides to stop her gaze on the man who at least said a few words to her. "I'm still not quite sure why the FBI needed to question me about Mr. Boyle, Dr. Lecter. Isn't it already confirmed that he's a victim of this Copycat?" she innocently tilts her head slightly to the side, always composed and calm in her movements.

A little bird in a cage. She can be crushed in the palm of one's hand if one wishes so, but she is far more fun and useful when locked in here, completely dependent on her owner. Don't let them peek behind the curtains, for then everyone will see what goes on inside that little dollhouse - Will is sure he can see the bruises on the girl's wrist hiding behind the bracelet. "Freddie Lounds may occasionally learn something curious from the FBI, but even she isn't capable of overhearing absolutely everything important about an investigation, Ms. Verger" Will remarks in an even voice, still taking off his glasses and folding them, tucking them inside his jacket. "Some facts have been discovered and we'd like to clarify them."

"We are merely gathering information to better understand Mr. Boyle's situation," Hannibal adds calmly.

Margot looks at them, her ribcage heaving slightly as she takes a deep breath, but her face remains calm and she shrugs. "I'm all ears."

Will decides to start with a lie, just to get more information. "Since Copycat killed Cassie Boyle and then her brother a week later, we shouldn't dismiss the possibility that there's a

personal story behind all of this" he says, knowing that's absolutely not the case and yet managing to look confident. "Mr. Boyle's girlfriend said that he spent most of his time at work, here, and that except for her and his sister outside of this place he didn't socialize with anyone. Do you know who he socialized with here? Did he have any friends? Foes?"

"I think that would be better to ask one of the employees about that, they may know a lot more about it than I do" Margot remarks. "I'm not used to watching every move my subordinates make."

"Of course" Will tries to smile a little, knowing he doesn't look very natural. "We'd like to see a list of employees. Could you give it to us so we don't take up too much of your time?"

The woman thinks for a couple moments, averting her gaze, but then sighs quietly and looks at Will. "Of course" she says, standing up and walking over to the cabinet with the folders holding all the documentation. Graham examines the interior of the room in the resulting silence, but everything around is too clean, tidied up by the servants - any traces that might hint at anything (and Will wasn't even sure what he wanted to find) are gone, and all that's left in their place is an empty shell that says nothing to him. Except that the carafe of alcohol hinted that Ms. Verger didn't mind a drink - but he knew what had caused that desire, and he didn't need to draw any far-reaching conclusions. "We keep everything electronically, but my brother insists on preserving traditions, even when it's not too convenient" Margot commented.

"Traditions can bind us to the past, or they can tie a noose of compulsions around our neck" Lecter remarks. "At times, however, they do both at once."

"There's a difference between tradition and picking up bad habits" Will says when the young woman finally hands him the folder he needs. He opens it, starting to look through the names of the camp staff.

"Passing the fire or worshipping the ashes" Lecter echoes him with a faint smile, and Graham hears him carry on a quiet conversation with Margot afterward, but their voices are muffled to him as he is too immersed in the text in front of him.

He stumbles his gaze over the photograph as another page of employee personnel files is turned. Matthew looks even younger, and he has the corner of his lips slightly raised in a perpetual smirk. A mischievous young man, and the photo was probably taken around the time in his life when he was willing to pretend to be lisping around everyone he knew just for the sake of a joke. Will runs his gaze down the lines of his file with bated breath until he comes across a record of his voluntary resignation; the date is not the first of July, but a little over a week ago, exactly the day Matthew ran away from here. Will makes a bookmark on that page with his finger, flipping through the rest of the material until he reaches the end, returning to Brown. He and Nicholas were the only catpeople officially hired to work here. "Did Nicholas Boyle react in any way to Mr. Brown's resignation?" Will asks suddenly, raising his gaze to Margot.

Ms. Verger barely reacts, only raising her eyebrows slightly as she looks at the man. "I haven't heard of anything like that" she replies calmly.

"And why is Mr. Brown suddenly left only now, in the fall?" Will decides not to stop. "It says here that he was a nurse at the camp, but as far as I know, the camp is active from June through the end of August. What was he doing here the rest of the time?"

Margot opens her mouth, clearly trying to think of an answer on the fly. "You see, we are located well away from the nearest hospital, so we need to have someone with medical skills on the territory - after all, lots of things can happen here" she says calmly. "We usually have another nurse working for us for most of the year, but she became very ill and we had to ask Mr. Brown to stay on the job for a while, and he kindly agreed. However, about a week ago our employee was able to return to work and Matthew wished to write a letter of resignation of his own accord."

Will tensely smiles slightly, looking her straight in the eye. She's a good liar. That doesn't surprise him. He just nods, continuing to test her, rubbing fear across her mind. "Can I see that letter?"

Margot arches an eyebrow. "Why are you suddenly so interested in some former employee?"

"You see, Ms. Verger," Graham calmly places the folder on her desk, moving a little closer in his chair. "People tend to find the most similar individuals to themselves in any unfamiliar group; it's a standard behavioral pattern. We trust people more if they are similar to us, or have had similar experiences to ours, or matching scars and traumas" he looks her straight in the eye. "And the statistics also show that cat people prefer to communicate more specifically with other cat people, and these two worked in close proximity to each other" he lowers his gaze to the folder opened on the page with Matthew's file for a moment to then look calmly at Margot again. "It would be… reasonable to assume that they may have communicated and at least shared something potentially important with each other" his voice is quieter, it's calm and steady. "That’s why we'd like to see his resignation letter."

Verger looks at him warily, but smiles slightly with the same tension with which Will had smiled at her. "Of course. Anything else you need for your... investigation?"

Graham ponders for only a moment before still deciding to press her further. "There were scars found on Nicholas Boyle's back, lacerations that are about a week old, maybe less, but they weren't inflicted by the killer" he says, looking into Margo's horrified eyes, watching every second of her reaction. "They were inflicted with something like a whip. We suspect it may have been done here, so tell me, Ms. Verger, do you know anything about that?"

He knows that it's not the question itself that surprises Verger, but the fact that they dared to put it to her. "I'm afraid not, Mr. Graham," she answers in a calm tone, and then tilts her head slightly to the side, really quite like a bird. "And I assure you that there is no place for such violence in the Verger camp."

Will doesn't hold back the smirk that pours out of him over the slight anger starting to turn into a dull headache. He rubs his face with the palm of his hand. "Of course, otherwise it wouldn't be *very good for you*, would it?" Graham replies wryly, quicker than he could think about it, and fixes his cold gaze on the girl, who immediately changes her face, as if the translucent veil of ice that conceals her features rolls smoothly off of her, shattering with a loud thud on the floor of this office. The fear in her round eyes mingled with realization, and

her lips opened as if she were about to say something, when suddenly they were all distracted by the sound of the door opening abruptly.

"Margot! What guests do we have, what's the occasion for this lovely tea party?" Mason asks, entering the room unceremoniously and noticing the two strangers. Will tenses as he stares at him, his hand moving to his gun on its own, but he stops himself in time. He can't just shoot him right here and now. He can't, can he?

Hannibal dignifies the cocky man with a glance before looking curiously at Graham again, observing his behavior. Margot, on the other hand, doesn't even try to feign a smile, only slightly hiding the nervousness within herself as she looks at her brother. "These are the FBI men; they're here about the Nicholas Boyle's murder."

"Oh yes, that cute little boy from the stable!" Mason exclaims, his tone fake. Will grits his teeth, looking at the man with a cold stare, as if ready to pounce at any moment. He notices the fun in Verger's eyes, and the corner of his lips curve up in a smirk just a moment before he continues. "What a shame! Well, it was to be expected after that horrible incident with his sister - what's her name, Kissy, Casey? That's right, Cassie Boyle. Oh, he was very upset after her death, all wrapped up in his work, trying not to think too much about her body being mounted on a stag's head," he says, going around the table and standing behind Margot, putting his hands on her shoulders. The girl flinches, her eyes staring into the void as if she is deliberately trying to escape into herself at this moment, a reaction learned through a wealth of experience. "He loved his sister, that's for sure. Certainly not as much as I love my dear Margot, of course, but still" he smiles, the light from the lamps reflecting in the panes of his glasses as he looks down at the girl, stroking the top of her head with the palm of his hand before stopping his gaze on the men he doesn't know. "First his sister gets killed and then himself. Tsk-tsk. There's clearly some shady family business going on here" he says and smiles, shifting his gaze from Will to Hannibal. "I love learning about other people's dirty family stuff. You learn people's weaknesses and get leverage you can mess with if you want. I'm always gathering dirt on my employees - I need to know what kind of people are roaming my area, don't I?"

Will feels like an old mug being hammered against the table, yet it still won't break. "And what dirt did you have on Nicholas Boyle?" he asks.

Mason sighs tragically. "None. The boy was cute, yes, but insanely boring. Normal family, mom with a tail, dad with none - he with a tail, sister with none. Classic hybrid marriage, both parents died of illness and old age, no time in jail, no fires or tragic deaths - well, until the case with his sister, of course" he corrects himself. "I'll be honest, I'm having a hard time figuring out what they did that made them so special that they caught someone's attention. Does the FBI have any thoughts on that yet? Mh? Share, don't be shy. I'm good at keeping secrets - I've got plenty of them myself" he smiles smugly, shifting his gaze from Hannibal to Will and back again.

Lecter senses the tension Graham is feeling now, senses the storm brewing inside him, threatening to break free. Realizing that Will must act carefully now, playing his long game for justice and revenge, he decides to save the day by not letting him say anything that would sadly cut short his becoming right here and now, ending this long-warming play on such an

unfortunate note. Demonstrating a calculated calmness, he intervenes in the conversation, and the measured gallantry of a European aristocrat is in his voice. "Nothing specific at the moment, but don't worry. Mr. Graham is very diligently putting the pieces of this puzzle together, and will undoubtedly come to the truth very soon" he says, bowing his head slightly, and really means it; he is sure that Will will soon figure out who is leaving him the breadcrumbs and for what purpose he is doing it; it may take one or two more bodies, but no more than that. His mind, even burning under the influence of encephalitis, was capable of marvelous things, and Hannibal didn't doubt him even a bit.

Will doesn't look at him when he says those words, and only sighs faintly, averting his gaze. He wants to pull a can of aspirin out of his pocket and pop a few pills in his mouth at once, and then be somewhere safe before he can do anything horrible or stupid (or horribly stupid).

"Well, I'm looking forward to it" Mason smiles, looking at Graham, and then his gaze slips to the folder of employee personnel files lying on the desk in front of him, and to a picture of Matthew, whose page reveals that very folder. "Oh, what do we have here?" he asks, and reaches out to take the folder; Will notices this and feels the heart in his chest skip a beat. He's a fool. God, what a fool he is! A slight panic creeps into his lungs and he forces himself to lift his eyes and look at the way Mr. Verger scrutinizes the photograph enclosed in Brown's personnel file before pulling it from the sheet.

"They think Nicholas may have been in contact with Matthew and told him something that could help the investigation" Margot replies quietly.

Mason snorts. "Nonsense. They've spoken once or twice. Nicholas wasn't much of a talker at all - always had to ask if the cat bit his tongue" he chuckles at his own joke, glancing at the men.

Hannibal smiles politely; he has no trouble doing so, especially keeping the knowledge within himself that the man will soon be killed. Will, on the other hand, remains tense and seemingly unemotional as stone.

"You seem to have a pretty good knowledge of what's going on in your camp" Graham observes, ignoring the slight dryness in his throat. "Might you also be aware of the cause of the lacerations left on Nicholas Boyle's back, inflicted with a whip and untreated?"

He looks up into Mason's face, who grins and squints suspiciously, looking back at him, and then the man shrugs. "I have no idea. Might have slipped my mind - it happens sometimes" he looks completely unconcerned and then smirks. "Though I daresay it's just a misunderstanding. Come on, cats are really sadomasochistic by nature - and what you're describing sounds very much like a simple play. Haven't you ever heard of it? Though I have to admit I'm surprised I missed such fascinating information about dear Mr. Boyle - if only I'd known, things could have been a lot more fun."

Will looks straight at him and sees a face on fire, and doesn't even flinch at this hallucination. He gets a very faint shred of pleasure imagining the torment that could be inflicted on this man. He can't look away, even knowing that his own brain now feels just as engulfed in fire; as if all the fuses in his skull have blown and everything inside is running on some kind of emergency system, at any moment risking to malfunction as well, banishing any remnants of

humanity from him and turning him into a savage berserker, wanting to shoot this man and bring his corpse back to his house to show Matthew and let him burn his dragon in the backyard. Right now, the thought of trying to avoid blood on his hands seemed almost absurd. What other choice was there? Even if he managed to put Mason in jail, he'd get out of there. Even if he managed to prove him guilty of everything he'd caused, he'd soon just be released on house arrest. And that's it. He'd still have an army of mercenaries on a short leash, ready to destroy anyone and kidnap Matthew, just out of gloat of causing him more and more pain.

But he should be smarter than that. Will exhales, leaning back in his chair, watching the flames shooting upward from the protruding strands of the man's hair toward the ceiling. "If you don't mind, Mr. Verger, we'd like to write down Mr. Brown's phone number and address so we can ask him a few questions" he says, holding out his hand for the file on Matthew.

They stare into each other's eyes for a few moments, and then Mason smiles broadly. "Sure" he says, returning the folder to Will's hands, tucking the picture torn from it into his breast pocket as if it's perfectly normal. Graham is disgusted, trying to hide it by lowering his gaze to the lines of address and number. Sure, he could have just asked Matthew where he'd lived before, but he wanted to show that he didn't know Brown and was really interested in his file because of the investigation, just so as not to arouse unnecessary suspicion. He didn't have to write anything down either, since his memory was good enough, but he did it anyway, for two reasons - first, to give the impression of a harmless ordinary FBI agent, and second, because he was afraid of simply losing time again. He opens the notes on his phone and types all the information in there, feeling Verger's scrutinizing gaze before closing the folder and placing it back on the desk, standing up.

Hannibal stands up as well, adjusting his jacket slightly, thanking them politely for their cooperation and saying goodbye. Will decides not to do the same, wanting to just leave the office as soon as possible.

As he is about to approach the door, he suddenly hears Mason's voice. "Oh, and, Mr. Graham" this makes him stop and turn his head only slightly, not wanting to look directly at the man, no matter what he wants to say to him now. "Please be sure to give Mr. Brown my most ardent regards when you see him" he utters and Will gets goosebumps running down his spine; he frowns, looking into Verger's face, seeing his smirk and dark look. "We all miss him very much."

It feels like a provocation, like a glove being thrown right in his face, and Graham flinches only slightly, as if recoiling back a little. He manages to keep his face almost indifferent before turning silently and leaving the office with a swift step.

He hears the sound of his own footsteps, but in addition to that, the sound of someone else's sobs, screams, meows, claws scraping against wood in the background again, all louder in his head now, and it presses, and he almost gasps, trying to get away from the Vergers as fast as he can, with Hannibal only a few steps behind him, watching Will a little from behind. He tries several times to call out to him, but Graham doesn't seem to hear his voice, only whispers to himself: *My name is Will Graham, I'm at the Verger's mansion, Virginia, not far*

from my house, it's - he glances at the cuckoo clock on the floor - *an hour and ten, and I'm fine, I'm fine, I'm fine, I'm fine, it's not real, it's not...*

He thinks he'll be able to breathe deeply once he's outside and the panic will go away, but in fact it only increases, and he feels hyperventilated as he slips his hand into his pocket to grab a couple of aspirin pills. He stops at the gate, resting his back against it, and throws his head back, whimpering in frustration when there are no pills left. He tosses it irritably toward the bushes when Hannibal finally catches up to him with his determined stride. "Will, how are you feeling?" he asks with a slight shadow of alarm.

Graham is on fire, and drops of sweat are visible on his face, beautifully lit by the sun. His blue eyes seem almost miraculous under the rays of the daylight, like two magical lakes, and Hannibal thinks for a moment that he should try painting with watercolors - it seems that he could at least try to capture that magical shimmer of colors that he wanted to drown in only with them. Will's breathing heavily and his ragged, agitated appearance evoke various feelings and emotions, the main one of which, as always with Will, can be called admiration.

Will swallows, his lips quivering slightly before he manages to speak. "He knows," he utters in a trembling whisper, not immediately forcing himself to look at Hannibal, standing quite close to him now, intimate gaze on his face with curiosity bordering on concern. Graham touches his burning sweating neck with his hand, feeling his own heartbeat beneath his palm. "Now he could come and get him at any moment. No, he'll definitely do it. And soon. He'll take him away. And it's my fault, I... if I hadn't come..." he begins to shake more visibly, as if gripped by a tremor, his gaze loses the ability to focus on anything, and he suddenly hears strange sounds again, like someone screaming. He looks around, flinching as if trying to find the source of the sound. "Did you hear that?"

"Will, I need you to try and focus on me" Hannibal sounds calm and convincing, looking at Graham closely.

It's as if Will can't hear him, he feels like his temples are trying to be drilled from two sides and the sunlight feels almost blinding and it's all too much, it's like he's suffocating from panic and sensory overload. Sobs continue to be heard in his ears, and he catches himself crying out of his eyes as well, tears running down almost burning his skin in thin paths. "I'll have to kill him," he says weakly, bitterly, before writhing in a new wave of pain and hiding his face in his palms to then try to cover his ears, as if that way he can avoid the sounds that were really only in his head. "Stop, stop, stop, stop..."

"Will," Lecter calls out to him a little anxiously, listening to the quiet rapid whispering:

"I'm Will Graham, I'm in Virginia, it's one pm, and I'm not a murderer, I'm not a murderer, none of this is real, none of this is--"

"Will, listen to my voice, you need to ground yourself" Hannibal says, reaching out after a moment's delay and touching his wrists to take his hands away from his ears, but Will resists for the first few moments, and then his trembling seems to intensify and any meaningful whispering stops. Carefully, Lecter puts his palms around his face and lifts it up to look into his eyes, and they appear to be rolled up in a seizure. Lecter contemplates what to do and makes a difficult decision.

Laying Graham down in the front seat, covering him with his coat, he drives him to the hospital.

Chapter 14

Will wakes up after another nightmare in the hospital room, shaking and looking around in a little panic. He doesn't immediately recollect yesterday, it happens rather gradually. The drive to here was more like having visions during a serious flu, his head ached insanely and it prevented him from functioning normally, he only trembled and clutched Hannibal's coat with his fingers, falling into unconsciousness several times. Afterward, already in the hospital, he seemed to have been given first aid and injected with some medicine, after which he calmed down a bit. Through the murmur of voices and the whimpering of dogs in his head, he could hear bits and pieces of Lecter's conversation with the doctor, the man talking about his assumptions regarding encephalitis and the symptoms Graham had been experiencing for the past couple of weeks. If Will wanted to ask why Hannibal, knowing this, had kept quiet before, he was in no condition to do so. He'd only allowed the doctors to perform the necessary manipulations on his body, feeling lethargic after the stress he'd endured and the medication he'd taken.

After that, there were tests, checks. He had a brain scan and, from what he now remembers, the doctor confirmed encephalitis. After that, he was in a hospital room, and, after another injection, fell asleep. He woke up several times, and Hannibal was nearby, in a chair - either awake and watching him, or napping. During his first more or less conscious awakening, Will had tried to ask for a phone to contact Matthew because he was definitely worried, but Hannibal had calmly told him not to be too anxious about it cause he'd texted Brown on his behalf, softening the angles a bit so the guy wouldn't be too worried. As he then found out, Lecter had texted that the hospital's tests had confirmed his encephalitis and asked him to stay the night, and that he would try to contact him in the morning. That wasn't likely to do much to reassure Matthew, but it wasn't like either of them had much of a choice.

Waking up now he felt a little better, at least more aware, despite the nightmare he had just had - it was still already more familiar and understandable to him than the state he had experienced before and during his seizure. Heavy breathing and the dark images flickering in his head were the new normality, and he, sitting up in his bunk, came to his senses rather quickly. Swallowing, he focuses his gaze on the chair Hannibal sat in last time, but now it's empty, and Will doesn't know how that makes him feel.

He turns toward the opening door and sees Lecter, who must have only briefly been gone, and catches himself exhaling in relief. Hannibal glances back at him, realizing that Will has finally come to his senses. "Will," he greets, "good morning. How are you feeling?"

Graham swallows and licks his parched lips. "Like I'm wandering through the smoking wreckage of my mind's house that just burned down."

"Sounds better than the state you were in yesterday" Hannibal remarks calmly, closing the room door. "What can you remember?"

Will sighed. "We were at Verger's. I had a seizure," he swallows, remembering the seemingly real screams. "You took me to the hospital and they ran tests and diagnosed me with

encephalitis. Some form of it" he wrinkles his nose as trying to actually remember such details proves to be almost painful.

Hannibal nods, looking at him carefully. "It's commonly referred to as a feline from" he says, walking further into the room and pouring Will some water from a pitcher into a small plastic cup, handing it to the man. He nods his thanks and drinks greedily, feeling on his tongue the aftertaste of the medicine. "But contrary to its name, it's not transmitted through cats. You were probably bitten by a vector, some kind of insect. A few millennia ago we were not susceptible to it, but through genetic mixing with our feline brothers and sisters we have been given the miraculous ability to carry this disease too" he says, sitting down in his chair. "Your ability to carry this disease indicates the presence of certain feline roots in your family tree" Hannibal remarks with mild curiosity.

"None that I'm aware of. Maybe on my mother's side" Will sighs. "You knew I had it. The disease," Will doesn't ask, so Hannibal doesn't feel the need to answer. He doesn't try to justify himself, either, though, and then Graham nods, deciding to continue. "The watch was a test, not just an exercise. Matthew gave me one and told me I needed a brain scan."

"And I brought you to the hospital for that," Hannibal remarks. "Eventually."

"Yeah. *Eventually*" Graham snorts, setting his cup on the nightstand beside his bed and rubbing his face with the palms of his hands as he sighs. "I have a terrible feeling" he finally says, swallowing, and after thinking about it for a couple more seconds he looks exhaustedly at Lecter. "It feels," he licks his lips, saying it a little louder than a whisper, "it feels like I did kill him" it sounds akin to mystery, like he's sharing a big secret and he's afraid of being rejected, of being judged.

Hannibal holds back a smile, never for a moment taking his gaze off Graham's blue eyes. "Is that what you were dreaming about, Will?"

He swallows, averting his gaze, wrapping his arms around himself, and then nods.

"Tell me," Lecter offers softly, "how did you do it?"

Images flash before Will's eyes like slides from another of his lecture's presentations. He stares at one point, seeing it all as if it were real. "I... beat him to death. It felt... like a flash of rage, anger, hatred" he is silent for a while, looking away grimly. "And then I mutilated his corpse" Graham admits after all, and doesn't see Hannibal's eyes light up with interest. "I opened him up and... swapped his internal organs with pig ones. Cut off his head and put a pig's head in its place."

Lecter remains silent, waiting to hear what else Will has to say, but the man, as if shocked at what he's saying out loud, continues to remain silent. "The method of killing is very emotional, but mutilation of this kind requires a certain amount of organization, calculation," he remarks, and ponders his next steps as he watches the man. Graham wrinkles his nose, clearly still unable to accept his inner desires, his inner self. "Mason would deserve such a fate, Will. He's a pig that should have been made into pork. I know that, and so do you," Hannibal says calmly, and Will looks up at him. "There's no point in blaming yourself for

your mind trying to suggest the most palatable scenario possible for you. Tell me," he pauses, tilting his head slightly to the side, "how did you feel when you mutilated him?"

Graham's lower lip trembles, and the moisture of restrained emotion glistens in his eyes; he holds back that door of his mind behind him with his last strength, but the water is already beginning to flow outward, filling the hallway, staining the soles of their shoes scarlet. He keeps his gaze fixed on the doctor's dark eyes as he squeezes out one word: ***"just."***

They look into each other's eyes, and Hannibal feels a pleasant satisfaction. It was as if he were watching a god being born. He could spend hours in that position, just absorbing the sight of Will, finding nourishment in him alone, but they are interrupted by the sound of the door opening, causing the two of them to turn toward the entrance.

Alana notices the awake Graham first, and only then Lecter, and greets them politely and with an uncertain smile. She closes the door behind her as she makes her way inside, starting to ask Will in a soft tone how he's feeling. It turns out to be strange for the man, as if dissonance, and it takes him a moment to switch from his state while talking to Hannibal to something new, nervously shoving away the dark clouds consuming his mind and distorting his features. When he does so, he catches himself scratching his hair again and thinks of Matthew, immediately flinching in nervousness. "I need to go home" he says, trying to reflexively stand up, but the young woman stops him.

Bloom understands him in her own way. "The doctors want you to stay here for at least another twenty-four hours before they let you go home for treatment. Your form of encephalitis is easily curable, but it would be best if the doctors keep an eye on you at least for a while longer. Just to make sure the treatment doesn't cause you any serious side effects," she tries to speak convincingly, but gently, as if to a child. Will swallows, still avoiding looking directly at her. "I can come over and feed the dogs while you're here, you don't have to worry about that" she says softly.

"No-" Graham flinches and reflexively looks at Hannibal almost with panic. He definitely didn't need anyone else finding out about Matthew, definitely not now and definitely not Alana.

Bloom looks at him confused. Lecter, on the other hand, looks calmly into Will's eyes and then smiles softly at Alana. "That won't be necessary, Dr. Bloom. I've already agreed to help Will with this" he assures her, and the man feels both a wave of relief and a nascent unease inside. He tries not to show any of it, smiling awkwardly at Dr. Bloom and nodding, confirming Hannibal's words, when the door opens again - Will wants to roll his eyes in annoyance at too many faces in the room - and a doctor in a white coat enters, asking everyone to leave. Graham looks after Lecter a little anxiously, not doubting that he will indeed come to his house, even though the dogs obviously have someone who might have fed them. He just wants to be done with his conversation with the doctor as soon as possible so he can get to the phone and call Matthew, to hear his voice, to make sure he's okay, to reassure him and himself. Closing his eyes, he could easily imagine him sitting anxiously next to Max on the bed, nervously stroking the dog behind the ear, in the dark, listening to every sound in the house, finding no peace even in his sleep, tormented by nightmares the

contents of which Will could only speculate about. He'd never dared ask, and it was unlikely he ever would at all.

A slight sense of paranoia only grew as his ability to think returned to him. What if there are Mason's men in the hospital, too? He sighs heavily, rubbing his head, though it no longer hurts as much as it used to - the medication does seem to be helping. When the door to his room closes, he immediately picks up his phone and dials the number he needs, glancing toward the exit, making sure no one is there. The slow beeps are pressing on him, he feels a pounding in his temples, until Matthew finally picks up and Will exhales in relief. "Will? Are you okay?" immediately comes Brown's anxious voice.

"Hey," Graham says softly, falling backwards onto the pillow with the back of his head and covering his eyes, smiling a little. "I'm okay. I feel much better."

"I should have been more attentive," Matthew sighs. "I could have realized things earlier and made you go to the hospital right away instead of getting you in this condition."

"I'd hardly have listened if I hadn't been brought to this condition" Will remarks, largely to assuage the now unnecessary guilt in the young man. "Hannibal took me to the tests."

"He could have done it earlier," Brown remarks irritably, and Graham can easily imagine his tail wagging at that. The image makes him smile.

"Maybe," he says softly. "If you don't like him so much, you don't have to meet him when he comes to feed the dogs" as if by the way Will adds.

"He'll do what?!"

"Don't worry."

"Will, I could feed them myself," Brown insists. "There's no need..."

"I thought so too, but if you bother to look in the fridge you'll realize that's not the case" he sighs. "You can't go out to the store. And you can't walk the dogs. You can't go outside, remember?" Will tries to say it softly, imagining Matthew continuing to wag his tail unhappily and sighing, resigning himself to the reasonableness of the man's words. "He'll just drop off the groceries and walk the dogs. Like I said, you don't have to socialize with him, just lock yourself in our room and that's it. I don't think he'll try to push you into anything."

"No shit," snorts Matthew. "I'll meet him and keep an eye on everything he does. And find out why he didn't tell you about the encephalitis right away. I'll be the one pushing him" he says firmly.

"Please don't" Will asks softly. "He's on our side. I think."

"Well that sounds *very* reassuring."

"Matthew," Graham says softly and sighs. He bites his lip as he stares at the ceiling, wondering how he can comfort the young man. "I miss you" he suddenly utters, and he hears a loud nothing in response.

Brown falls silent, freezing in place, stopping in the kitchen doorway. Will's words feel like a sudden warm light bursting through the blinds. He leans his shoulder against the jamb, smiling in a slightly shy way. "You do?" his voice is hesitant, but gives away the smile his pale lips curve into. Matthew licks his lip, fixing his hair with his free hand, tucking his strands away from his forehead. "Wait," it suddenly hits him what Graham just did, and he opens his mouth, throwing his head back against the joint. "You asshole, I know what you're trying to do! You want to make me soft so I wouldn't bite your therapist!"

Will smiles a little. "Is it working?"

"Yeah, it's working" Brown rolls his eyes, unable to force himself to stop smiling. "Jerk."

Graham's smile grew wider; he could almost feel himself close to Brown, though he lacked his scent, which would have been so much more pleasant than the smell of medicine and hospital. Right now, the only thing that could comfort him was his voice and the image Will replayed in his head. "I really miss you, Matthew" he says softly, realizing it was true. "I'll be back tomorrow, as soon as I'm allowed to leave this place. And I'll take a week of sick leave. How does that sound?"

Brown bites his lip, looking up at the ceiling, pondering his words. "And we'll... pick up where we left off yesterday?" he asks a little timidly cautious.

Will remembers his touch and the closeness of his lips. The amount of trust Matthew has for him is amazing, considering the circumstances, and the man wants to repay him with his care and love - the good thing is that he has enough love in him to do so. He thinks about how nice it would be to kiss Brown. He's very kissable.

"Sure," he says with a slight smile, "I promised."

Matthew covers his eyes, imagining the soft curve of Will's lips at those words, his beautiful blue eyes, his stubble and beautiful soft curls. That image alone makes the butterflies in his stomach flutter, and he feels dumb, biting the tip of his tongue, realizing he's lost. "Okay. You talked me into it," he sighs. "I won't hiss at Dr. Lecter when he comes in. If he behaves himself properly."

"Oh, don't doubt that," Graham grins. "He acts like he comes from the old aristocracy, like he's got a silver spoon in his mouth or something."

"Oh, that doesn't sound very good," Matthew says uncertainly. "Well, you know, the old aristocracy used to be the ones that used to enslave my ancestors and all that."

"He's not..." he sighs. "I assure you, he's fine. He's from a hybrid family" Will decides to explain.

"Oh."

"His mother and sister were like you. So I'm sure he won't give you a reason to... hiss at him. God..."

"Well we'll see about that" Brown says, though already less skeptical about a stranger coming into their home. He suddenly catches himself calling Will's house their home and bites his lip, realizing that he has dissolved so quickly into that coziness, as if he had been on a roller coaster ride - swiftly and without a pause. Now it's as if he's on another lap, hovering at a great height, preparing to plummet downward.

"Matthew," Graham's voice brings him out of his reverie, but he can't hear the smile in it anymore - only fatigue. "Be careful, okay?" the man asks him, remembering Mason and his request to give the young man a fiery greeting when they meet. A knot of anxiety twists in his stomach, but he tries not to give Brown too much reason to worry. It would be better to discuss this tomorrow when he gets home and be there to distract the man from bad thoughts and worries.

"Of course," Matthew replies, smiling a little. "Don't worry about me, Will. You need to get some rest."

"I'll still be worried, but it was a nice try" Graham snorts, then sighs. "Text me more often, okay?"

"Sure. I promise I'll do my best to tell you if anything bad happens. Or anything funny" he chuckles softly and it makes Will far more relaxed. The fatigue takes its toll under the influence of the medication and he soon hangs up the phone, falling asleep. He wakes up several times during the day and checks his phone first, reading the messages from Matthew to make his mood better and soothe the tugging anxiety in his heart.

He tries not to think about Mason and the nightmares that visit him relentlessly throughout the day and night.

Chapter 15

Hannibal pulls up to Will's house, looking around with relaxed curiosity as he gets out of the car. He wonders if Verger actually managed to piece together all the clues in his head and realize that the special agent is in some way connected to his escaped cat, or if he was just in a playful mood back then during their last conversation. Either way, he'd like to hope they had a couple more days left to get everything necessary done in time. He already knew who would be in his frying pan next, and he knew when, and he'd hate for those plans to be ruined by an attack by Mason's men on his new friend's house. That would be just awfully inconvenient.

He picks up the bags with everything he needs and heads quietly to the door; he could have knocked, but decides instead to pick up a spare key from the stash and open the house himself, being immediately greeted by an agitated pack of dogs. They must have remembered him by his scent, but, just in case, Hannibal decided to placate them once more and fed each one with treats of his own making. He had no trouble getting them to behave and only then did he sense the presence of someone else nearby. Calmly looking up in the right direction, he sees a young man standing tensely by the stairs with a gun in his hand.

It was a bit out of the way Hannibal thought guests should be greeted, but he could understand Matthew's situation, and wasn't the least bit offended, calmly raising his gaze from the weapon to his face. "Good evening. We haven't been properly introduced to each other yet; I'm Dr. Hannibal Lecter. Will warned you of my arrival, did he?"

Brown continues to be just as tense, looking at the man incredulously. Hannibal notices that among the entire pack, one dog never approached him, remaining standing near the feet of its seeming owner. "He did" Matthew utters, not pointing the gun at him, but still holding it in his hand. The tail behind his back tensely barely sways.

Never waiting for a return introduction, Lecter nods quietly, picking up his bag and going to walk past the young man towards the kitchen. "I brought food. Not just for the dogs, but for you as well. Will warned me about your empty fridge" he says, seeing Matthew tense up as he walks within two steps away from him. It wasn't that helpless fear he was afraid to see in him, though; it wasn't a fear of restraint, but one that urged him into action. He had no doubt that Brown might indeed have shot him if circumstances had demanded it. To their mutual fortune, circumstances at this moment demanded quite the opposite.

"I'm not hungry" Matthew says as Hannibal begins to arrange containers of home cooked food from his bag onto the table.

"Nonsense" Lecter states calmly. "You've hardly eaten anything since last breakfast, and you haven't even finished it" he remarks, casting a quick glance into the bin. "Stress can block our appetite, but that's really harmful in your situation. Don't you think you should be full of energy if something happens?"

Matthew looks at him warily, frowning slightly as Hannibal, having washed his hands in the sink, opens one of the containers and, finding a plate in one of the drawers, sets down two servings of some sort of dish. Brown realizes that the man is not going to leave soon, wanting to share a meal with him and probably discuss something. He decides to agree to this (though he rolls his eyes and still continues to hold the gun), and walks over to the table. "What's that?" he asks a little critically, sniffing slightly, trying to assess Hannibal's scent at the same time, but the man seems to smell of almost nothing - just some expensive perfume or the like. His clothes smell like dry cleaning, and it doesn't give Matthew any definite impression, except that either Lecter is a neat freak or he just has something to hide.

"Žemaičių blynai" Lecter replies, then sets the plates on the table - the dish had been stored in a special container and was still warm. "This is a Lithuanian dish. Potato pancakes with meat filling. My sister loved it. Please," he gestured for Matthew to sit across from him.

Lithuanian, then. That's where that accent comes from. Matthew tries to remember something about this country, but all he knows is that it was part of the USSR and is somewhere in the Baltics. He sighs, glancing back at Max following him all over the place, and sits down nonetheless, placing the gun on the table, not intending to put it far away. He sniffs at the dish. "What kind of meat?" Brown asks calmly as Hannibal looks at him with mild curiosity.

"What do you think?" he asks instead of answering and tastes his dish first, largely to spare Matthew from paranoid thoughts of the man's possible desire to poison him.

Matthew snorts, shaking his head, taking a fork and a knife, looking down at his plate. "I have no idea. All I can tell you is that it smells like meat, egg and potatoes" he says and tastes a bite, chewing on it, realizing how hungry he really was all this time. He finally decides it's good enough, so takes another bite before continuing, looking up at Hannibal, remembering something. "Will said you smelled my pheromones on him" he says and, meeting the man's gaze, shrugs eloquently, "how come?"

"I believe I inherited it from my mother. Even for a member of her species, she had an astounding sense of smell" Lecter replies calmly as he continues his meal.

Matthew looks at him with mild curiosity. "Well, you didn't inherit the other things" he remarks. "Which makes you a wolf in sheep's clothing" he points at him with his fork, leaning forward slightly and squinting.

Hannibal is amused by his demeanor. His eyes show true feline insolence and cunning, but behind the lightness and cheerfulness lies a readiness to grab a gun at any moment. "In that case, you can be compared to a cat in the bag. It's hard to tell what you're hiding and what could be made of you. Same with Will, though" he sips the tea he brought in a thermos and poured into cups.

"Better to be a cat in a bag than a wolf in sheep's clothing" Matthew notices and looks him straight in the eye. "Will had encephalitis hidden inside of him and you knew it" he says without his previous cheerfulness. "You knew, but you didn't tell him anything until you were forced to by circumstances."

"Was I?"

"Don't try to joke with me, your eyes give you away when you lie" he says, keeping his gaze on him. "Pupils dilate with a certain kind of effort. You dilate, that's a yes. No dilation equals no" the young man explains and takes a pause before asking a question. "Do you want to hurt Will?"

"No," is the calm and honest answer.

Brown frowns his eyebrows slightly and then snorts, leaning back in his chair, still looking away. "Foolish of you in that case to put him in danger of the disease developing right in his brain" he remarks, picking up his fork again to continue eating.

"I had the situation under my special control" Hannibal replies calmly.

"Of course, that's why I had to run outside in the middle of the night when he was trying to sleepwalk his way straight to the alligators or foxes ready to eat him" Brown wrinkles his nose irritably, tail swishing and ears twitching. Lecter watches this with mild interest, inadvertently remembering how Mischa used to get annoyed when their mom told her she couldn't go for a walk during a thunderstorm.

He's silent for a couple moments, letting that memory pop into his mind and just as quietly dissolve into the haze of the present. "Good thing he has you" Hannibal says, knowing that's what Matthew would be most pleased to hear as an answer right now.

Brown shifts his gaze to him for a few moments, then nods. "So that was the plan? Letting disease arrange a Finnish sauna right inside his brain, knowing I'd help him? But what did *you* need that for?" he frowns, trying to understand the doctor's train of thought.

Hannibal shrugs calmly, lowering his gaze to his portion, continuing to eat. "Unilateral acts of caring are good, but mutual caring helps establish greater intimacy and promotes codependency" he says and Matthew arches his eyebrows. "Maybe I was just curious to see what would happen."

Brown stares at him without touching the rest of his portion, too absorbed in the sprouting realization in his head. Lecter wanted him and Will to get close? To what end? There were clearly some pieces of the puzzle missing here, and he sensed that curiosity was far from the only reason for what Hannibal was doing all of this. However, he wasn't lying when he said he has no desire to hurt Will. It was all confusing to Matthew and seemed too complicated. "What kind of therapist are you?" he asks.

"An unconventional one, so I've been told" Hannibal replies calmly. "But my therapy is very effective, especially under these circumstances. Finish your dinner" he nods, clearly changing the subject, giving the hint that he's not going to give out any more information, and Brown looks at him a little incredulously for a few moments before continuing to eat.

Hannibal walks the dogs, mostly just curiously observing their behavior from the sidelines, and Matthew has to coax Max out with everyone else - the dog clearly didn't want to leave him, especially when a stranger was around. Left all alone in the house, Brown looks out the window and decides to call Will, who answers after a couple of rings, obviously waking up

from his nap. Matthew feels a slight pang of guilt, but it's too late in any case. "Hey. Your creepy doctor is here."

"You think he's creepy?" Graham asks sleepily, rubbing his face but not feeling displeased that Brown woke him up.

"Oh, so he seems perfectly normal to you?" Brown asks with a dose of irony. "He even smells... just perfume and dry cleaning. It's confusing."

"Well, he's very pedantic and obviously quite wealthy" Will simply says, shrugging his shoulders and then smiling slightly. "How do I smell?" he asks curiously.

Matthew is a little lost, not knowing exactly how to answer that because describing Graham's scent was difficult for him, he had already surrounded himself with it so much that he was used to it as if it were his own. "I don't know... home?" he says nonetheless, feeling awkward, and then snorts. "And my pheromones, if your creepy friend who sniffed you is to be believed."

"You've been sniffing me too," Graham remarks with a grin.

"In case you haven't noticed, Will, I'm a cat. Meow. Is that a good enough answer?" he asks, and Will laughs lightly, almost inaudible. "He's out walking the dogs right now. Fed me some kind of Lithuanian meat-and-potatoes thing."

"Oh. And how was that?" the man asks with mild interest.

Matthew answers reluctantly, not feeling pleased at the prospect of admitting that he enjoyed the man's food. "Not terrible" he says, but Will realizes from his intonation that it's almost the same as if he'd said the food was just wonderful and he'd love to try to have dinner with Hannibal again. "But he really is kind of weird, Will. He never lies, but he's always so skillfully evasive as if he's been doing it all his life."

"Well, he is a therapist, Matthew. They do that sort of thing for a living," Graham remarks, then sighs. "You think he might be dangerous?"

"To you? No, I don't think so" he replies, looking outside the window. Hannibal is still standing nearby, watching the dogs. "For me neither, I suppose. But you still have to be careful with him. I don't know what's on his mind, and I don't like it."

"Well, my priorities right now are set in such a way that since he's not a danger to you, it's fine" Will sighs.

"Oh, so I'm a priority?" Brown asks with a smirk, stepping away from the window.

Graham laughs softly at his abruptly changed flirtatious tone. Brown really could switch quickly if he knew which buttons to push. "You already know that, dumbass."

"Has that really become my pet name? I should think of one for you. How about 'pup', hmm?"

"Oh my God," Will feels himself blush and licks his lips. "That's terrible. We can discuss it when I get home" he says with a smile.

"So many things we'll have to discuss, jeez" Matthew smiles and sighs. He is silent for a couple of moments. "I don't know how I'll sleep tonight. I guess I'll have to steal your clothes from the laundry basket" he's silent again for a few seconds, thinking better of it, "if that's not too creepy."

"Well… maybe just a little bit. But I doubt my sweaty t-shirts will contribute to your restful sleep, you know" Graham remarks.

Matthew laughs slightly, covering it up with a cough. "I like the smell of your sweaty clothes. Reminds me of the nights we shared together." He feels like his cheeks are on fire and covers them with his hand, his tail moving wildly behind him. His mind is completely blank. He has absolutely no idea why he just said that. He feels stupid, like he slipped on a banana peel. He's not sure if it sounded as romantic as he meant it to.

Will doesn't hold back a smile, though he feels some embarrassment along with it. "Well... then take it, sure. If that can help you to get a decent night's sleep. You can even let Max lie on the bed if you want. Although then you'll have to let the rest of them as well..."

"Gonna have to share a bed with a bunch of bitches while you're gone" Brown sighs almost tragically, and Will is energized by his mirth, feeling almost magically better. Matthew suddenly hears the sound of dogs scampering closer to the door and turns around to see Hannibal opening it to let the pack in. "Oops, it looks like the walk is already over. I think the rules of politeness require me to hang up" he faces Lecter with a glare, remaining calm and trying to cultivate the remnants of mirth within him as if to supposedly show that he doesn't really care about his presence.

"Yeah, probably," Will sighs with a slight smile. "And remember about priorities, Matthew. Okay?"

"Got it, pup," Brown replies calmly, but then still breaks out into a smug grin, looking away from Hannibal when he hears Will's reaction:

"Dumbass."

Matthew licks his lips, putting his phone away and hearing Max hurriedly walk over to him, stopping near his feet. He rubs his ears with a smile before looking up at Lecter with a sigh. "So... you and Will were at Mason's. How was it?" he asks, trying not to sound anxious.

Hannibal ponders the wording of his answer. "It's hard to tell" he says, "but on the whole it may have been helpful, I believe. I am convinced that it is always necessary to ascertain for oneself the qualities of a pig before serving it to the table."

Brown frowns slightly, not quite understanding his words. "Your words make me question what kind of meat was in those pancakes of yours" he jokes, snorting, and Hannibal only smiles at him faintly. "Will is convinced you're on our side - and don't get me wrong, I think

so too, but I... I'm not quite sure why, Dr. Lecter" Matthew notes, tilting his head to the side. "You're not a saint, are you? And you clearly don't view all of this from a moral perspective."

Hannibal doesn't deny it, looking calmly at the young man. "For you and Will, this story is personal, you're driven by emotion, by a desire for revenge and justice, a desire to ensure your own safety - all of this is instinctive, almost like the good old law of exact retaliation, an eye for an eye. There's even something biblical in Will's desire to get rid of Verger" he watches Brown from a decent distance, eyeing the slightly tense sway of his tail and the frown of his eyebrows.

"But you and Mason don't have any personal story" he remarks, encouraging him to continue.

"Mason and I may lack this, and yet he embodies traits that disgust me - rudeness and discourtesy. I find those traits particularly ugly. That's enough for me."

Matthew tilts his head, frowning slightly, looking intently into Hannibal's face. "...No. It's not that. There's something else here" he freezes, as if trying to see something in Lecter's eyes, mouth slightly ajar. It only lasts a couple of moments before he realizes something and chuckles thoughtfully. "You encouraged codependency, between Will and me, so that Will would be more motivated to kill Mason" he says slowly, taking a leisurely step towards Lecter. "And by encouraging that desire of his, you have fostered your codependency with him as well" Matthew stops a step away from Hannibal, looking up at him slightly from below, into his hazel eyes, calm as those of a resting predator. "If Will kills Mason, he will come to you. For the understanding you so graciously offer him. The only question is... what will you do about it?"

Hannibal tilts his head slightly to the side, mirroring Matthew's movement while looking calm and almost innocent. "I'll give him that understanding," he replies simply, and Brown hums, stepping back a step again, heading towards the table.

"Okay. But if I find out that you hurt Will, even accidentally," he said, picking up the gun he'd left there. He turns to face Hannibal, leaning casually against the table, the gun held loosely in his hand. "I will kill you, Dr. Lecter."

The man nods calmly with a slight hint of submission, lowering his gaze only for a moment before looking at Matthew again with a faint smile. "I have neither intention nor desire to hurt Will. Or you, Matthew. We're on one side."

Matthew looks at him for a long time before finally lowering the gun. He lets out a small chuckle. "Maybe we are," he says with a lazy smile on his face. Suddenly this smile turns sour again in an instant. "You know, Dr. Lecter, I've noticed that you talk much but don't say much," Matthew remarks, pausing for a moment to let his words settle. "It's common for people who are used to keeping secrets. The wolf is silent because it is hard for him to imitate the bleat of the sheep whose skin he wears. The wolf is silent because he knows that his voice would scare away his prey. I've known people like you - perhaps too many of them. They've scarred me, taught me to be careful and to always trust my instincts. Frankly, I'm not sure it's smart of me to try to seek out an ally who can throw off his skin at any moment and gnaw the cat along with the bag. A wolf can put on sheep's skin, but under that skin, he's still a wolf. He craves meat, he hunts prey, he wants blood" Brown remarks, looking at the gun in his

hands before raising his gaze. He is silent, thinking about all of this. "But it's not like I have a choice in this, right? I can't just shoot you now. That would be... pretty shortsighted of me" he sets the gun aside on the table next to his hip.

"I think we'd both feel awkward if you tried that" Hannibal remarks nonchalantly, clearly not the least bit intimidated by the prospect of being shot in the forehead.

Matthew chuckles quietly and shakes his head, averting his gaze. "I wonder what Will sees in you" he says, looking at Hannibal thoughtfully again. "What he would see if he closed his eyes and tried to imagine a murder that could have been committed by your hands."

Lecter looks back at him with the same calm expression of thoughtfulness. "Maybe that is something we will find out quite soon" he says in a low voice, causing Brown to frown slightly, but immediately easily halting the progression of this dialog in that direction, smiling softly at the younger man. "I'm afraid I must be going" he says, checking the time on his wristwatch, "I have some unfinished business that must be completed today."

Matthew stares after him suspiciously, trying to realize what was behind all of Hannibal's words.

He does not tell Will anything about this conversation.

Chapter 16

The amount of medication he needed to take for the next two weeks seemed excessive, but if the doctors said it could prevent further unsolicited hallucinations and losses of time, he was willing to do it. Taking a sick leave at work, Will still decides to complete one unfinished task before returning to the Wolf Trap, and that is to stop by Matthew's old apartment to see if his belongings are still there. Expectedly, there's a new owner already living there, but he graciously allows Will to "take all that junk from the closet" once the man shows him his FBI Special Agent ID. Graham goes into the apartment and opens the right door, convincing himself with his own eyes of Matthew's words that all of his stuff could fit into one hiking backpack.

He spends some time going through those things, taking advantage of the fact that the new tenant of the apartment doesn't mind. Will puts in the bag some clothes that will obviously need to be washed, as they were all covered in a thick layer of dust after so many months. There are also a couple of old lighters in the box, which he decides to bring with him as well, though they could probably be thrown away like some old piece of trash. Looking at one of them, he thinks he can easily imagine Matthew lying in his bed listening to the noise from the TV, flicking one of these, gazing mesmerized at the flame, finding a kind of special pleasure and comfort in it.

He doesn't find any pictures or any other kind of memorabilia. It feels sad, and Will catches himself thinking that he'd like to help Brown flesh out some fond memories. Take a couple pictures, perhaps. Give him something small, something of purely symbolic value. He feels that living without such things is painful, hollow. He wants to fill that void.

As he is about to get up and leave, he suddenly notices a necklace at the bottom of the box, and for some reason it seems to him that a cross used to hang on it, but it was not among Matthew's things, so perhaps it was lost even before what happened to him. He thinks about it for a moment, looking at the broken clasp, and then decides to take the necklace with him after all. He'll figure something out.

It's a long drive home, and he has to take his medication on the way, since he had to get it three times a day, and he can almost distinctly hear Matthew's grumbling about how he has to eat before he takes it, or else he'll end up with sick stomach. The image makes Will smile faintly, and he looks forward to coming home and being able to see Brown, to hear his voice, to smell him, to touch him. To feel at home.

He doesn't hold back a new smile when, as he gets out of the car with a bag of Matthew's things and his medication, he hears a cheerful dog barking. The cab driver drives off and Will opens the door, and he nearly loses his balance when several joyful dogs pounce on him. The only one who remains relatively calm amongst his entire pack happens to be Max - he continues to stand at Matthew's feet, happily wagging his tail with the man in unison. "Hey. I'm a little late - I had to stop by somewhere" he says, picking up a little bag full of stuff.

"Stopped by where?" Brown asks a little perplexed, taking the bag from his hands.

"By your last apartment" Will replies, sighing, and smiles when he sees the young man's eyes rounded with shock. "I took the opportunity to go through the personnel files of Verger's employees. Your file was in there too" he explains as he takes off his jacket, giving the pair of persistent dogs some affection. "Saw the address and thought... why not."

Matthew doesn't know how he feels and doesn't respond, retreating to the living room to unzip the bag and look at his things. Will takes the opportunity and grabs a necklace from his pocket, tucking it quietly away in a drawer in his desk where he usually makes lures. He watches from the sidelines as Brown almost completely ignores his clothes (Graham guesses he really did take them for nothing; Matthew likes wearing his t-shirts and pants, and he's unlikely to give them up now), but his eyes really light up when he sees a few of his old lighters. He flicks each one, checking to see if they work, and can't stop smiling like a kid looking at the little pocket light. Will only had matches at home, and Brown rarely dared to play with them - and that was only when he was home alone. Then he examines the rest of the contents of the bag, as if looking for something specific, but he doesn't find it. Graham presses his lips together to keep from giving away the surprise ahead of time, wanting to please Matthew later. "Thank you," Brown says softly, clutching one of his favorite lighters in the shape of a dragon in his hand - it was given to him by his fellow inmate at the mental hospital, mailed to him a couple of years after they were discharged. Matthew had no idea where he was now, because the envelope didn't have any proper identification, but the shape of the dragon spoke for itself. It was a nice little trinket from an old almost-friend (he doubted that Francis had really considered him a friend before he got it, though; it was more as if Brown had been annoying to him all the time, not allowing him to spend time in silence; but he still seemed to enjoy his chatty company, willing to keep up any conversation about dragons and past traumas with a real enthusiasm). Matthew was glad Will hadn't taken it as junk or left it in the apartment.

Graham only smiled at him, nodding, and rubbed his curly hair lightly as he walked past him into the kitchen, causing Brown to laugh softly. "The hospital food was awful and I was given an insane amount of diet recommendations. I should probably make a trip to the store later, but I want to get some..." he stops talking when, upon opening the fridge, he sees several containers signed in neat handwriting. "What's this?"

Matthew looks back at him and sighs. "Compliments of the chef. Not only did he feed the dogs and me yesterday, but he also brought several containers of food. If it doesn't suit your diet, I'll gladly eat all of it, don't worry" he smiles.

Will takes one of the containers, frowning a bit as he examines first the label (the name of the dish doesn't tell him much) and then the contents before sighing, shaking his head and putting everything back. "How nice and over the top of him..." he utters softly, deciding to just drink coffee for now. He thinks about Hannibal's words about the cat's courtship methods and the clause about providing food for loved ones, but immediately shrugs it off. It's just too much.

He thinks back to his unfinished conversation with Matthew, but doesn't feel too confident to continue it now. Brown, thankfully, doesn't try to initiate anything himself, quietly joining him in the kitchen for coffee as well. "I think he's fine," Matthew finally says, and Will doesn't immediately realize who he's talking about.

"Really? I thought he seemed very suspicious to you" Graham notes.

"He is suspicious" Brown nods calmly, swinging his tail. "But he's not going to hurt us. At least not in this situation. He... uh... wants to be friends. I think he likes you and has some sort of plan to become your friend or maybe even something more, I'm not sure" he takes a sip of coffee calmly. "I can't really judge him. It's hard not to fall in love with you."

Will opens and closes his mouth, embarrassed by the slight blush, and snorts. "Okay, um... I don't care about any of that right now. I'm grateful that he took care of you while I was in the hospital, and that he... doesn't treat me like I'm crazy, even knowing about my desire to kill Mason, but I really do have more important issues to think about right now" he remarks, hurrying to dismiss any thoughts of Lecter from his mind as he takes a sip of coffee. "Actually, I'd like to just eat right now and get my mind off things for a bit. Do some engine work or make a new lure, I don't know" he sighs.

Matthew smiles softly at him. "Sure. I can heat something up. Um... if you give me your diet instructions and a couple minutes, I can sort through a bunch of complicated names on these containers and pick something appropriate. You can go take a shower or walk the dogs in the meantime" he offers, and Will decides to agree. He goes outside again, wandering slowly through the field while the pack of dogs runs nearby, all the while looking back toward the house and the woods, afraid of seeing a hint of Mason's men or any other strangers. He can't stop thinking about the mocking threat that came so easily from Verger's lips the last time they met. He was so self-righteous, so unprincipled. What's he doing now? Drinking martinis with his sister's tears? Looking for a new catboy to play with? Preparing ideas for Matthew's torture? He recalls the man taking the young man's picture from his personnel file and feels the anger return to him. Will clenches his hands into fists, tightening his lips, thinking about how good it would feel to punch him, breaking the lenses of his glasses and his nose, seeing the blood on his face…

He shudders his whole body and rubs his face with his palms, feeling the headache again. Part of him had hoped that these violent thoughts were just a consequence of his illness, a result of his brain not functioning properly, but that didn't seem to be the case. He really wants to hurt Mason, with his own hands. And he's scared.

Graham comes home with the pack, and there are two meals already warmed up in the kitchen. Matthew, opening a page on Wikipedia, reads about "Mulgipuder", some dish from Estonian cuisine, but Will doesn't really care much about what exactly is on his plate - it looks and smells more than edible, and he just starts eating, listening to Brown's voice as a pleasant background noise. Matthew soon puts the phone away though, deciding that the recipe doesn't sound so bad, and eats too, humming, remembering eating with Hannibal at the same table yesterday. "Okay, I don't like him, but I have to admit he's an awesome cook."

"You're such a cat" Will teases with a smirk, glancing at him over his mug as he takes a sip and Matthew snorts but smiles in a way that brings adorable dimples to his cheeks.

"I'm not that cheap. The fact that I like eating his food doesn't mean I'm going to let him scratch me behind my ear - that's for you and for you only" he says and Graham smiles at him slightly, glancing at his ears, remembering how soft they are. "And if anything, don't tell him

I enjoyed his cooking. I don't want to give him a reason to feel smug, not after I pulled a gun on him."

"You did what? Matthew..."

"He didn't mind much, chill," Brown snorted. "He knew I wouldn't kill him, so he wasn't even scared. Unfortunately" he stabs a piece of pork on his fork. Will shakes his head, sighing, but decides not to discuss it any further.

After the meal, fatigue takes over Matthew - it looks like he didn't sleep well all last night - and he tries to talk Will into going to bed with him, but Graham says he wants to get his mind right a little first by doing some lure making. Brown decides not to insist and just lies down on the couch in the living room, not far from Graham, to be close to him, wrapped up in his robe. He dozes quietly, twitching his ears a little in shallow sleep, while Will sits quietly at his desk, first fixing the clasp on his necklace and then making a pendant for it. Occasionally he glances over his shoulder to look at Matthew, who is still quietly sleeping, and with the sound of his quiet sniffling and the ticking of the clock, he plunges into his work. He does it carefully and leisurely, twisting the right parts, checking the weight to make sure it's not too heavy to bear on a neck, and thinking long and hard about whether to add a feather, but in the end he decides not to.

Finished, he looks again at Brown, still sleeping quietly on the couch, surrounded by a couple of dogs sleeping on the floor. His posture is hardly comfortable, but Will has seen worse; he's heard that cats in general often sleep in strange places and strange positions, and he's sometimes seen pictures of cats on the Internet who look a lot like Matthew in terms of their behavior. He has a couple of pictures saved on his phone, but he has never dared to show any of them to the younger man, thinking it would be a little strange. Graham approaches him cautiously, holding the finished pendant in his hands, and watches his ears twitch in the direction of his footsteps, but Brown still doesn't open his eyes, perhaps not really waking up yet. Will stops by the couch at the side of his head and, taking the pendant in one hand, raises it a short distance from Matthew's face.

The young man gradually comes to his senses, blinking sleepily a couple times with a smile, sensing Graham's presence nearby, and then he opens his eyes and immediately his pupils dilate almost to their full irises and his hand flies up, striking playfully at the pendant, and Will laughs at this cat-like action. "What's this?" Matthew asks with a grin, grabbing the swinging pendant. Graham lets him pick it up and take a closer look, and walks around the couch to sit next to Brown, who has made some room for him there. Matthew examines the lure, touching it gingerly with his fingers before allowing himself to turn his attention to the necklace itself, recognizing it as the one left over from his cross he'd lost in one of the fights a couple of years ago. That chain was the only thing that reminded him of his mother, of his childhood, was physical evidence of something before the hospital, but he was sure he'd lost it at that apartment, that he'd never see it again. And yet here it is - fixed, whole and in better condition than he remembers. He lifts a bright gaze to Will, full of love and adoration and gratitude, and Graham smiles softly at him. "Thank you..." the young man says quietly, and then abruptly reaches forward, clutching the necklace tightly in his fist, and wraps his arms around Will, nuzzling his nose into his neck. He feels unexpectedly emotional and hugs Graham even with his tail.

The man is surprised at first, tensing up, but then relaxes, hugging Matthew back, gently stroking his shoulder blades. "I'm glad you like it" he says, one hand burrowing into his hair, touching his soft strands and ears. Suddenly he feels Brown sob quietly, trying immediately to hide it behind a laugh. It touches him and he strokes him again, seeking to soothe Brown, to give him his tenderness, to convey love through touch. "It's okay," he says when Matthew sniffs his nose again.

The young man pulls away though, quickly hiding his gaze and wiping the moisture from his eyes a little embarrassedly with the palm of his hand before looking at the pendant again.

"Need help putting it on?" Graham offers, and Brown, looking into his eyes again, nods, hesitating only a moment. He hands it to the man, and after a moment's thought, Will leans forward again, as if for a hug, but in fact he does so only to fasten the clasp of the pendant around Matthew's neck. His cheek touches his soft dark hair, inhaling a little of its scent accidentally, and it feels so good that he feels a current run through his heart and his body with goosebumps and a wave of warmth at the same time. He covers his eyes for a couple of moments, turning his head slightly, gently bumping his nose against his strands, finally managing the clasp and letting the pendant fall relaxingly around Brown's neck with its light weight. Matthew is frozen in sweet anticipation at this point, feeling Will put one of his hands on his shoulder, lightly stroking it through the fabric of his t-shirt as he smoothly pulls away again, his face a couple millimeters away from his, and they look into each other's eyes, almost touching with the tips of their noses. Graham moves forward, his forehead resting against his, his gaze sinking lower, and it's as if time stops for the two of them. Matthew feels his other hand on the back of his neck, and he puts his hands on the man's waist, feeling his heartbeat heavy in his chest, as if it were a second before it exploded, and covers his eyes, preparing to meet Will's lips with his own. He almost feels them touching, when suddenly a dog’s barking makes them jerk reflexively, pulling away from each other.

Graham turns his head toward the door, while Brown opens his eyes and stares longingly into his handsome face, as if his dream has just slipped from his fingers like fine sand. He exhales quietly, removing his hands from the tense man's waist. "Looks like someone's here," Matthew says quietly, getting up from the couch, and Will finally returns his gaze to him. Brown covers the locket on his chest with the palm of his hand, as if feeling magical soothing warmth from it, and looks back at Graham slightly embarrassed, smiling awkwardly. "You need to check who's there, don't you?" his words are echoed by a confident knock on the door, and Will sighs heavily, feeling a prick of guilt over the missed moment. Matthew says nothing, moving closer to the stairs to hide there, carefully eavesdropping on what's going on at the door.

Graham reluctantly rises from the couch, rubbing his neck, feeling out of place, and heads out to check who has decided to uninvitedly come to visit them. He looks out the window first to see the car just in case, and sighs heavily as he recognizes it as Jack's black one.

Will opens the door, preparing immediately for nothing but bad things to happen. "Jack, I thought Hannibal told you about me not being in a condition to work. And you could have just called first" he remarks in a tired voice.

"Didn't see too much point in that" Crawford replies at once, clearly determined and slightly agitated about something. "We have a suspicion that we've found a new Ripper's victim, Will."

Graham freezes, blinking several times, and then frowns. "I... I don't understand, don't you have other consultants on his case? I wasn't involved in this one."

"Past consultants haven't helped us in any way, we haven't made any progress in catching him in the last couple of years, we're not even one step closer to this freak" Jack says slightly irritated. "We need your help, Will. I'll drive you myself, and Beverly will be there, she's aware of your condition, you don't need to worry - she said she'd help if anything happened" he says and Graham rolls his eyes, already opening his mouth to refuse, saying to enjoy Dr. Lecter's opinion on the matter, but Crawford prevents him from doing so, as if casting a fishing net on him with one phrase. "The body was found twenty minutes from here."

Will feels numbness throughout his body and a dry throat. Twenty minutes west was the Verger farm, twenty minutes east were his other, more normal neighbors. For a moment, he has the thought that it was Mason who was the victim of the Ripper, so fond of punishing bad people, and he doesn't know how to feel about it. Part of him is relieved, the other part is annoyed. *It should have been me.*

He swallows and licks his lips. "Who's the victim?" he asks cautiously.

"One of Mr. Verger's guards," Jack answers, and Will exhales, either relieved or just in an attempt to calm down. "He was found at the gate of their estate."

Graham averts his gaze before nodding a few times. "I... I'll take my car" he replies, before closing the door after getting Crawford's agreement. Why is the Ripper suddenly killing Mason's guard? It seems too strange and stressful coincidence for him, and he sighs heavily, rubbing his face with the palms of his hands in an attempt to gather his thoughts. When he hears Jack's car driving off toward the highway a moment later, he shifts his gaze toward the living room, and expectantly sees Matthew already down the stairs, looking a little pensive and tense. "This shouldn't take long," he says awkwardly, feeling guilty.

Brown sighs, leaning his shoulder against the wall and folding his arms across his chest. He shakes his head with a tired smile. "There's nothing I can do to stop you. Go on, detective. Just be careful."

"Don't worry about me," Will asks softly.

"I'll still be worried" Matthew grins, leaning forward a little, looking slyly into his eyes, "but it was a nice try."

Will doesn't hold back a small smile, realizing Brown's hint, and only nods awkwardly before looking away. Despite the fact that he really wasn't going to spend any longer than he should at the scene, he still decides to take his pills with him, throwing a slightly guilty glance at Matthew, still standing next to Max a little to the side. "Just in case. There's still a small chance I'll lose time again" he excuses himself.

"You don't have to make excuses to me, Will" Brown remarks calmly. "And I really would feel a lot better if you had your meds with you. Go" he smiles slightly at him and then sighs as Graham does leave the house, clutching the fishing lure pendant nervously in his hand. He lowers his head to get a better look at it in his palm, feeling a pleasant pang of tenderness at the thought that Will had made it especially for him. And how could he possibly resent him? If Will wants to make their kiss something private, unhurried and special, that's even sweet. Brown is willing to wait. At least for a little while.

He walks over to the window, peering cautiously from behind the curtains toward the car pulling away from the house. Graham, feeling a little uncomfortable at the thought of the possibility of facing Mason again, drives in complete silence to his destination, trying to focus on the work he needed to do. Jack thinks it could be the Ripper - but not enough time has passed since the last series of murders, has he really decided to disrupt his routine because of this guard (or, presumably, a mercenary from Italy, willing to hold people hostage and torture whomever the customer wants for a small extra fee)? Or was he provoked by something else? Someone else? He sighs heavily, turning down the road toward the estate and starting to see familiar cars in the distance. Two minutes later, he's already stopped next to Jack's auto, stepping outside and peering uncertainly over the backs of the forensics team, trying to get a glimpse of the corpse, but to no avail. Crawford's loud voice calls for everyone to disperse, and Graham's gaze slides beyond the gate, spotting Mason standing near the stables in the distance, looking back at him curiously through the theater binoculars.

Will clenches his fists, keeping his gaze on him for a few long moments, and then shifts it lower, focusing on the finally unobstructed corpse.

Graham flinches, and then stiffens in place, paling slightly. The noise of distant conversations and footsteps faded into the void of his thoughts as the outline of the body in front of him became clear, and his breathing hitched as he felt a sharp jab of panic somewhere in his stomach. Mason's guard sat with his back leaning against the gate, but instead of his head, it was a pig's one, and beneath his tattered shirt he could see a gutted belly. There are organs sticking out of it, but they're not human, Will knows that - he can't help but know it. The picture before his eyes flashes like the beat of a metronome, and it's as if he hears the dead Hobbs' voice again: *"see?"* and turns sharply in his direction, but all he sees behind him is the darkness-absorbed silhouette of a wendigo in a suit, with antlers above his head. He feels the weight of his palm on his shoulder and his body shivers. "Copycat" he pronounces almost startled, as if a blind man has had an epiphany.

"What?" he is suddenly brought out of his vision by Jack's voice, stepping sharply closer to him. "Copycat? What do you mean Copycat?"

Will shivers and looks away from him, rubbing his neck, feeling as if he's sinking ever more rapidly into the water. "It's the Copycat. The same man who killed the Boyle's. Why pave a road of breadcrumbs when you can just lead straight to the gingerbread house?" he chuckles weakly, stopping his gaze on the murdered man again and remembering telling Hannibal of the dream he had about killing Mason, about seeing the vision at The Tail Taker's crime scene, how all those Copycat murders seemed as if they were addressed to him personally, gift-wrapped clues, instructions. Remembers every conversation, every word spoken, remembers Matthew saying that something was wrong about Hannibal. It all seems so

obvious now that he almost bursts out laughing hysterically, but he holds back and only smiles wryly, painfully, staring at the open belly. Dreams out of his eyes - and the veil falls away.

"What? What are you talking about? How can it be Copycat, Will?" asks Jack persistently, trying to regain his attention. "Will" he says and Graham still looks at him, albeit not in his eyes. "If it's a Copycat, who is he copycatting?"

Me.

I imagined killing Elise Nichols, putting myself in Garrett Jacob Hobbs' shoes - and the Copycat killed Cassie Boyle. I imagined killing The Tail Taker's victim, putting myself in his shoes - and Copycat killed Nicholas. I imagined killing Mason...

Hannibal put his wish on his canvas. That's the message screams, no - through the cocoon of the butterfly the Copycat whispers, that's what it's all about - to bring him here, in this moment, in this place. Imitation as the highest form of flattery. We often imitate unconsciously people we like, or consciously if we know psychology - oh, and Hannibal knows psychology. He killed all these people for him, imitating his fantasies and perfecting them, elevating them to the level of art. He's killed before, and a lot, he's had time to hone his own skills, and now he wants something new, someone new - an apprentice to teach what he knows; a partner he can talk to honestly without hiding behind a few sheepskins. Someone who can understand. Someone who needs understanding. Someone who has enough desire, motivation and ability to take someone's life - all it takes is a little push, a little madness, and how lucky he is to be sick, and how lucky he is to have someone he wants to protect - it all comes together so lucky and beautifully that it would be a crime on his part not to take a chance and carve out a follower, a friend, a soul mate out of this bloody piece of skin. Suddenly it all begins to make sense; just as he thought, having found a motive, he easily puts the pieces of the puzzle in place, with each new moment revealing new facets of a picture that had previously eluded his grasp.

He's killed before. He had taken organs before.

He'd fed them.

Not with the flesh and blood of the Christ, but the meat of sinners who deserved no better fate than to be served on a plate as an act of courtship and care.

"Will?" Jack's voice calls out to him again, and Graham straightens up, looking with tear drops in the corners of his eyes at the mutilated corpse, then lifting his gaze to Mason standing in the distance.

"It's the Copycat, Jack" he says, then looks at the agent, "and the Chesapeake Ripper. Two names - one face" Will smiles crookedly. "He never stops. He doesn't take breaks, he just changes his suit. I mean, what would he eat otherwise?" he asks and turns away, leaving the man with this information, heading back to the car with heavy steps. His gaze darkens with every passing moment, and before he gets into the driver's seat, he glances again in the direction from which Mason is still looking at him, and he is willing to bet that when he bumped into his gaze, the asshole waved him.

Graham silently gets into the car, heading in the opposite direction from his home.

Chapter 17

When Hannibal hears a knock on his office door, he's a little surprised as he looks at his wristwatch - his next client wasn't supposed to be here for another half hour, and he's unlikely to be that rude or eager to see him to show up that early and expect to be calmly greeted. Adjusting the cuffs of his shirt, the doctor heads for the door, opening it and freezing in slight surprise for just about a moment.

"Will. Didn't expect you to come" Lecter admits, examining the man with a calm gaze, especially focusing on his intense look staring straight into his eyes. Right now it doesn't seem like he's strongly opposed to any eye contact at all.

"No, you did," Graham says confidently, his voice as calm as ever. "You sent me an invitation, didn't you?" he asks, and Hannibal's eyes flashing with delight for a moment. It's nice to be a mystery, but it's even nicer when there's someone smart enough to figure it out.

"Didn't think you'd get it so soon" Hannibal corrects himself; he really thought it would take Will a while to realize all the information he'd uncovered, but he seems to have arrived while his thoughts were still fresh and blazing with the fire of realization. "Please, come in," he says, ushering the man into the office, and the man hesitates only for a moment, must be thinking reflexively about the danger before he crosses the threshold and finds himself alone in the same room with the serial killer. Lecter looks at him a little from the side, watching him walk thoughtfully slowly across the room, stopping near a statuette.

"Jack knows the Copycat and the Ripper are the same person" Will decides to say.

Hannibal smiles faintly, feeling the pleasant sensation of being recognized by someone else. "And yet you came here alone" he remarks.

Will chuckles quietly, actually almost emotionless. He touches the dark stone ornate antlers with his fingertips. "If I told him about my suspicions, I'd have to explain that Copycat has been mimicking my violent fantasies all along. I'd be labeled a lunatic and at best fall under suspicion myself. I don't have any definite evidence," he falls silent, and then still shrugs grudgingly, "except for the food in my fridge, I guess. But even if I could prove that you brought it, I'd have to put Matthew in danger. I can't afford to do that" he takes his hands off the statuette and turns, looking at Hannibal. "You have twisted me into a very uncomfortable position, Dr. Lecter. Even with your confession I wouldn't go to the FBI with it given our current circumstances. Well done" he remarks with a touch of sarcasm balancing on a thin string between irritation and admiration.

"Perhaps I want to help you untwist yourself from the uncomfortable position life has put you into" Hannibal says calmly, taking a step forward; Will doesn't stay still, turning away and continuing to walk around the office.

"You want me to kill Mason" Graham says, glancing around the room. "No. You have the intention of ensuring that I have no choice but to put him to death" he corrects himself. He turns to face Hannibal again, stopping near the ladder. "What if I don't kill Mason, Dr.

Lecter?" he asks, bowing his head slightly, frowning. "How far are you willing to go to mold me into your padawan?"

"A living Mason is a threat without any interference of mine," Hannibal remarks calmly, adjusting his cuffs, approaching Will; the man leans back against the ladder with a sigh. "If we don't get rid of the pest in time, it could rob the village of its crops. If you don't stop Mason in time, he could rob you of someone you've managed to tame."

"Why don't *you* kill Mason?" Will sighs, tilting his head to the side, gazing with an almost pained expression in his eyes at Hannibal. "You despise him. I know that's enough for you. Why does it have to be me? Just because you want me to kill someone? That's rude, Dr. Lecter."

"Having me kill Verger won't be good for your therapy, Will. You know that. And you knew I was going to say it" Hannibal says calmly.

Graham chuckles at the reference to everything going on as therapy. He knows how Hannibal thinks, knows what he wants from him, sees his motives and the approximate trajectory of his future actions. He's driven him into a situation where he has no choice but to get his hands dirty in Mason's dark, slimy blood. What else can he do? Any other choice would jeopardize Matthew or himself, shattering the fragile house of cards of his timidly built happiness and then bringing them to the fire so that only ashes remain. It would be easier if Hannibal had killed Mason, but Will can't see any scenario in which that might be possible. He hasn't pulled the trigger yet, but he's already aware of the inevitability of the shot that will bind him in bloody pairs with the Ripper himself, involving him in a macabre dance from which he's not sure he'll be able to escape alive. At least he'll have a chance to keep Matthew safe this way, to bring him out of the darkness, to give him an opportunity to move on with his life. Maybe it would be even better if, after everything, he didn't stay with him. Maybe it would be a healthier option for Brown, which he was unlikely to choose, though. Not when the other side of the scale is existence in Will's arms. They both realize that. Perhaps they're not the only ones who do. But what else does Hannibal expect from him? A companion? An accomplice? A partner?

Will swallows, focusing his gaze back on his calm face.

"What do you think will happen after I kill him?" Graham asks quietly, frowning a bit tensely. "The blood binding us by threads of obligation? We'll start killing together, become partners in crime?" he chuckles, knowing that this is indeed a possible outcome, and yet saying otherwise out loud. "That's not going to happen, Hannibal. I'm forced to disappoint you, but it will have to remain only your dreams. I don't have your appetite," Will whispers caustically, looking into his dark eyes.

"Appetite comes with eating, Will," Lecter calmly parries, smiling slightly as he takes another half step forward, causing the man to exhale and lean closer to the ladder in an attempt to keep some distance, but really only making himself feel more like being cornered by a wild predator. "Tell me, Will," Hannibal says, sliding a glance down his bare neck before focusing again on the beautiful face clouded with worry. "Why are you afraid to kill Mason?"

Will presses his lips together tightly, looking only into Lecter's eyes. "I'm not a murderer" those words are easy to say, they seem like the truth, the simplest possible one.

A calm smile just a moment, as if he had heard an amusing joke. "You said at the hospital that Mason's murder felt just, but that's not the whole story, is it, Will?" Hannibal continues to press with a calm, even tone and his mere presence a half step away. He sees Graham swallow, lowering his gaze before forcing himself to look at the psychiatrist again. "You're afraid of killing Mason because you know you'd enjoy it. It's not killing the dragon you're afraid of, Will, it's that you won't be able to put the sword back in its scabbard. You're afraid of gaining an appetite, a thirst that will have to be satisfied, a thirst that is already inside you but will only grow stronger after the first sip" as he speaks Will feels his own breathing get heavier and he restrains himself, throwing his head back and gazing into Hannibal's reddish eyes with a hard expression on his face.

His skin burns under the other man's gaze, and his mind blazes like a campfire that's been picked with a stick. He swallows.

"Is morality still more important than protection and safety?" Hannibal asks, tilting his head a little.

"You're not talking about protection and safety, and you're certainly not talking about morality here," Graham shakes his head, licking his lips, looking at Ripper with a frown. "You're talking about instincts. Survival. Evolution" he says caustically and suddenly seems to find a new piece of the puzzle tucked under the couch, inhaling a little deeper. "You said you *had* a sister, Hannibal" he tilts his head to the side, raising an eyebrow slightly. "What happened to her… was about morals... or instincts?"

He gazes at him intently, waiting for answers, as if trying to catch a glimpse of the skin beneath the suit torn by the sharp reminder like by a knife. He thinks he sees a spark in his look, like the ripples of water into which a stone has been thrown. "Very often morals and instincts in our lives are engaged in a complex struggle. God gave us the ability to think and evaluate the consequences of our thoughts, and we have to pay the price of a restful sleep in exchange for free will" Hannibal replies calmly, and it doesn't escape Will that he is holding something back within himself; blocking the door of his mind with his back, from which a chill wafts. "It would be unwise of us to ignore his gift, only exposing ourselves to insomniacs. Otherwise it might begin to seem like a mere curse."

"Who knows the fine line between a gift and a curse better than me?" Will sighs, looking at Lecter almost tired and weary. He is silent briefly, allowing the pile of thoughts in his head to form into something more organized and available to be voiced aloud. "The strategy of your actions towards me reflects the motives and goals formed in your head" he says, then pauses. "Do you feel like you're doing something that will be good for me?" he asks with mild curiosity.

"Life is not a fairy tale to simplify it into good and evil. Who knows the fine line between those concepts better than we do?"

"Mason is evil. There's nothing close to the line here," Will replies.

Hannibal shrugs obediently. "What about the Chesapeake Ripper? Is he evil?" Lecter asks.

Graham lets that thought develop in his head, suspecting he's making a mistake by allowing himself to think about it that way. "I can feel bad about the fox chewing up the rabbit, but I can't blame it for acting according to its nature" he finally replies. This answer seems to satisfy Hannibal, and he continues to ask leading questions, as if by the Socratic Method trying to bring Will to the truth:

"How is Mason different from that fox?"

Will frowns for a moment before looking away in grim reverie. The appropriate wording appears in his mind on its own. "Lack of harmony."

"Spiritual ugliness," Hannibal agrees. "You find him repulsive. He is nothing more than a barbarian, unable to appreciate true art and only wanting to destroy it, just because he can. You wandered through a dark, cold forest and saw a lonely rose that awakens your aesthetic senses and gives you comfort and hope for something good. But he wants to trample this flower that you want to let bloom before your eyes. It is natural to feel the desire to trample him so you could continue to enjoy the sight of the flower."

"The woods are lovely, dark and deep, but I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep, and miles to go before I sleep..." recites Will quietly, and then sighs, and his voice grows even quieter. "Can you promise me something, Dr. Lecter?" he looks into the man's dark eyes, somehow seeming even darker and bloodier now, whether from the play of light or his imagination. "If something happens to me before I can do what's necessary," Will says, "you'll finish what I started and give Matthew a chance for a peaceful life."

Hannibal stares back at him with interest, never ceasing to marvel at how beautifully Will breaks down under the influence of the circumstances thrust upon him. An incredibly strong savior complex, overly sensitive empathy or pure affection - it's not so important what it was that led him to this perception of events, it's the result that matters. Lecter realizes that this is not the end, not even the true beginning of his transformation; he is full of doubts and they will only penetrate deeper into his mind once he leaves his field of vision, left alone with himself and the same old morality. It would take a new push, a final one, for what must happen to happen. And the fact that, even now, Will was already considering almost seriously his options, realizing that he might not be able to deal with Mason and a bunch of his mercenaries, even surprised Hannibal a bit. He hadn't realized that the mirrors of his soul could reflect the best in him so vividly.

"You have my promise" Lecter nods slightly, looking him in the eye, but decides not to dwell on it. "But you really should be more confident in your abilities, Will. With proper motivation, a man becomes capable of many things, and very little can really stand in his way."

Graham averts his thought-filled gaze from him and clings to one of the book spines, aptly illuminated by the distant light from the lamp. He slides out finally with a heavy sigh from under Hannibal hovering over him almost birdlike, shoulder sliding over the bookshelves and reaching out to take that book, feeling a little distant. "I just hope you realize that Matthew is the only real reason I'm not going to tell Jack the truth about the Ripper he's so looking for"

he remarks coldly, examining the book in his hands. It turns out to be Hugo's "Notre-Dame de Paris." Will turns to look at Hannibal again. "Not that I have any intention of doing so. But you and I both realize quite well now that my perception of desires and intentions can change over time."

Lecter only smiles slightly, feeling pleasantly satisfied that Will is comfortable or brave enough to threaten him, albeit in such a veiled way. "Don't worry about it, Will. I realize it wouldn't be very smart of me to piss off a guy who thinks about killing people for a living" he says with a slight spark of amusement in his eyes, and Graham only grins faintly, turning away and walking toward the exit with a book in his hand. It wasn't very polite of him to take it without asking, but Hannibal was perfectly fine with this display of willfulness. "Have a good evening, Will," he says to him. "And please remember that you can count on me. The context may have changed, but I'm still willing to be your paddle. Especially now."

Will doesn't answer the Ripper, only pausing at the door for a moment, as if really searching for something to say, but in the end he still just walks silently outside, clutching the book in his hands. The air of the street pleasantly cools his skin, refreshing his thoughts, and he is about to walk to his car to get home as soon as possible, when suddenly he notices a large black expensive car parked very close by, the door of which opens and a familiar figure comes into his field of vision, making him freeze with a pale expression on his face. He immediately begins to think of possible interpretations of what is happening. Has he been tracked down and is about to be taken right out of here? Does that mean Matthew is already at the Verger's as well? Maybe Hannibal decided to provoke him? Or did Mason somehow know it was Hannibal who killed his guard? On his face, the thought process is reflected only in a barely perceptible expression of confusion.

"Mr. Graham! What an unexpected meeting!" Mason says, smiling and spreading his white-gloved hands, stepping closer. "My goodness, it looks like you and I have the same psychiatrist! What a fascinating coincidence" he smiles and Will frowns slightly, blinking a couple times in confusion at this information.

"Are you here for a session with Dr. Lecter?" Graham clarifies, and Verger smiles innocently, nodding a few times, looking into Will's face with wide, almost frantic eyes with which he must be trying to either frighten him or show him friendliness. Neither particularly works in any case. "And since when have you been attending his therapy?" Will asks, starting to feel a certain amount of apprehension and suspicion.

"Oh, this is my first session" Mason says with a satisfied grin, and Graham nods thoughtfully, trying to figure out in which empty space to insert a new piece of the puzzle he thought he'd already put together. "Thought I could use a try. You know - mindfulness, all that stuff. My past experience with psychotherapy, though, was pretty boring. But I’m not gonna lie - I have quite high hopes for today, Mr. Graham!"

Will stares at him coldly, wondering why Hannibal hasn't told him about this, trying to understand his motives. Part of him wants to make a fuss about what's going on and tell Mason that Dr. Lecter wants to kill him, that he's the Chesapeake Ripper and wouldn't mind having him as pork at his dinner. He's curious to see what would come of it, has the desire, and yet not the intention. If Verger goes upstairs with a bunch of his men, it's unlikely that

even an experienced serial killer like Hannibal will be able to fight back properly, and without him any of Graham's efforts to get rid of Mason may become even more difficult to accomplish. This is why he only smiles faintly caustically, letting those thoughts fade. "Well, good luck with your therapy, Mr. Verger," he says, turning away, about to walk to the car.

"And good luck with your investigation, Mr. Graham!" Mason says, and one of his men intrusively blocks Will's path to the car, forcing him to wait, turning to Verger again. "Speaking of which. Have you visited my dear Matthew yet?" the man asks, looking him in the eye with a slight smile.

Asshole. "Yes. He wasn't at home" Will replies calmly. "He's missing, we don't know where he is right now" he doesn't avert his gaze even for a moment.

"Really? What a shame" he shoves both hands into his coat pockets. "Look, maybe Matthew is that Copycat? Hiding somewhere right now and killing people quietly, while everyone just look at the wrong corner?" Mason suddenly suggests, and Graham raises an eyebrow a bit, sensing the slight irony of all of this. "Why not, right? He's always seemed suspicious to me, Mr. Graham. You've heard about his mental problems? The kid burned down his house right with his mother. It's a nightmare, isn't it?"

Will sighs. "An impulsive mentally unwell arsonist doesn't fit the profile of a murderer, Mr. Verger," the special agent replies in an even and calm voice. "And Mr. Brown probably just went on vacation with the money he earned" he forces himself to smile slightly. "I'm sure we will find him soon".

They stare into each other's eyes. Will thinks about tying him up and burning him alive until all that's left is the smell of burnt flesh and a pile of bones with scraps of red stains. If he's really going to do this, he has to make sure Mason's body is never found. No matter how poetic the presentation could be, it would attract too much unnecessary attention.

What's needed here is caution and forethought, not a demonstrative flogging.

"Well, perhaps that is something you know best, Mr. Graham," Mason finally replies with a smile, and Will freezes, looking at the man with no apparent emotion. "Here" Verger pulls his hand out of a pocket, "have a chocolate!" and smiles, tossing a small chocolate bar, and Will catches it purely by reflex, clutching it in his palm tightly, lowering his gaze in an attempt to hold back a surge of frenzied rage and hatred; once the wave passes, he clenches his jaw and still raises his gaze to Verger. Will looks grim and threatening, and he answers him nothing, turning around and silently getting into the car, realizing only one thing: he will kill him.

With his own fucking hands.

Chapter 18

He throws the chocolate out the window in a fit of rage as he drives down the highway, and clenches his hands harder on the steering wheel, trying to control his speed. He starts to feel a slight fever, and takes his medicine, drinking it with water from a half-empty bottle, but it doesn't help, and Will guesses that it's because the nature of this fever lies not in the encephalitis, but in the emotions he’s experiencing right now. He's boiling from within.

As he pulls up to the house, he gets out of the car abruptly, walking briskly toward the front door and opening it. He hears the dog's joyful barking, which quickly subsides as he shushes the pack, nervously pulling off his coat and throwing it on the table when he suddenly hears the voice of Matthew coming hurriedly down the stairs. "Do you have any idea how worried I was? Why didn't you answer my calls? You've been gone for hours!.." the words sound bitter and almost reproachful, and Will freezes as he stares at the agitated guy approaching him. The scar on his chin is bleeding slightly anew, probably because he nervously started picking at it with his finger again. "...You didn't even respond to my messages, I almost lost my mind! Never, you hear me, never do something like that again or-"

Graham doesn't let him finish, abruptly closing the distance between them and wrapping his face in his palms, colliding his lips with his, kissing him boldly, deeply, hotly, skipping any shyness or tenderness, as if jumping straight off a cliff. Heat floods his body as Matthew, frozen in shock for only a few moments, makes a quiet sound, wrapping his arms tightly around his waist and responding to the kiss, trying to give him as much passion as he receives. The last doubts evaporate from his head and Will buries fingers in his soft hair, deepening the kiss and feeling Brown's tongue sliding over his before pulling away after a minute of this heat. Matthew greedily inhales oxygen, seemingly forgetting how to breathe.

"Oh my god, you kissed me" he says, his chest heaves with deep breaths and his lips curve into a cocky happy smile. Will's chin is stained with his blood just a little, and Matthew moves forward again, licking the small stain away with his tongue before licking his beautiful lips as well, closing them in a kiss again. The young man's palms slip under Will's shirt, touching his lower back, and he can't believe the actual reality of what's happening. He kisses his lover greedily, feeling his hand in his hair as he pulls away, gazing into Matthew's bright eyes with drunken passion. "Is that how you apologize?" Brown asks cheerfully, but Will doesn't focus on that, immediately trailing kisses down his neck, pulling his head back slightly by the strands, giving more room for his lips to touch passionately against this skin. "Oh god," the young man exhaled in a way he hadn't expected, feeling the heat spreading inside his body and covering his eyes, biting his lip. "Will..." he whispers as the man's tongue touches the scar under his chin and the heat begins to visibly concentrate down there. "Wait, Will..." Matthew pleads quietly, and only then does Graham seem to sober up a little, pulling away, breathing heavily as he looks into his face.

It takes him a few more moments to regain his breath a bit. His gaze slides from the bright eyes to the ajar lips and the scar, and there are distinct notes of guilt and anxiety in the haze of desire. "I... oh, I’m sorry... damn, I'm sorry. I should have thought better of that..."

The expression on Matthew's face changes quickly. "Oh, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, it's okay!" Brown hurriedly says, wrapping his palms around his face and looking into the man's eyes, smiling again, but a little awkwardly. "That was unexpected. Hot. Like, really hot! Just... wow" he lets out a quiet chuckle, his cheeks quite slightly pink, "but... um..." he looks behind his back awkwardly and Will tries to follow his gaze, seeing only a tail twirling in all possible directions. Matthew looks at him again. "We both know that Lizzie freaks out every time she sees me waving my tail around a lot, and I don't want third parties interfering in our little... um... romance. Especially not one trying to bite me. Okay?" he eloquently raises his gaze toward the second floor before looking back at Will with a smile.

God, he's adorable.

Graham covers his eyes, nodding, and kisses him again, sliding his palms over his shoulders and then his sides until he picks him up in his arms, causing Matthew to let out a surprised gasp, clutching at the man's shoulders. "God, you're strong!" he remarks excitedly, remembering watching Will work on the boat's motor, rolling up his shirt sleeves, exposing his strong arms. Graham's strength arouses him unexpectedly, and he nestles his lips under his ear, kissing the sensitive spot, trusting him to carry himself to the second floor. He feels strong hands on his hips, and a smile plays on his face; he trusts Graham, and now it's as if he's once again convinced of his strength, of his ability to protect him. He bites his earlobe, and Will flinches, stopping on one of the steps, and Matthew laughs, holding onto him tighter as he quickens his step to reach the bedroom faster.

Hitting his back against the door, he gasps and feels himself being released to the floor; one of Will's hands is on his side, the other pulling on the knob until it finally gives way and he opens the room, falling in with the young man. Brown laughs merrily, tail wagging, backing toward the bed, pulling off Will's white T-shirt from himself in the few moments it takes Graham to close the door. He tosses it aside, licking his lips, feeling the sweet anticipation burning from within as Will heads toward him again, shortening the distance to the bed. Matthew places his hand on his shoulder, moving forward first for another kiss, taking more initiative, sliding his palm lower and beginning to undo the buttons of his shirt, eager to get rid of it as soon as possible. Once it's managed to be tossed aside, Brown pulls away from the soft lips to not just touch the firm body with his fingers, but to caress it with a greedy gaze. "Seriously, if that's how you apologize, then your apology... is so damn accepted" he smiles cheerfully, colliding again with Will's blue eyes, immediately kissing him again, sliding his palms over his hot body and feeling Graham's hand in his hair, an uncontrollable touch against his soft ear that makes goosebumps run through his entire body.

Matthew grows more heated and decides to roll over sharply to ride Will, to take control, and breaks the kiss, hovering over him, grinning and waving his tail, wildly enthralled by the action. He leans in, beginning to shower kisses and light bites on the man's neck, inhaling the scent of his body like a drug. Graham shudders as he opens his lips and stares up at the ceiling, exposing his neck, burying his fingers in his hair again, and the young man's cold fingers, gradually warming against his skin, slide down his body, squeezing him as if in an attempt to see if he's really real, made of flesh and blood. Brown licks the small bite marks, letting out something that sounds like a purr, rolling his eyes in pleasure at being allowed to do all this. Will is tickled, but he guesses that this is the young man's way of expressing his love, and it actually makes him smile a little, scratching behind his ear with his short

fingernails. Matthew gasps, pulling away from his skin and arching his back, finding himself near his face again soon. "God, I want you to bite me" he whispers eagerly, touching his lips with his own for a couple moments before pulling away with a wet sound, looking longingly into his blue eyes again.

Will can't help but empathize with his frank desire, realizing that biting is just about as important to Brown as the kisses he exchanges with him so ardently. He licked his lips and nodded, then rolled over again so that he was on top, and kissed his neck again, his palm sliding over the naked, strong torso, then touching his groin through the fabric of his pants, stroking it gently, tenderly, seeing Matthew flinch, panting, tail twitching. Will kisses him as if preparing the young man's skin, and continues to caress him with his fingers, relaxing and arousing him enough to make the pain as pleasurable as possible. He swallows, hovering over the pale neck, scorching it with his warm breath, and then still bites him gently, leaving only a small mark. Brown moans softly, his whole body trembling with pleasure, almost vibrating with the tassel of his tail touching Will's leg. The man immediately remembers that it would be a good idea to take off his pants, but for now it's still too hard for him to tear himself away from Matthew's neck. He inhales his scent, feeling a pleasant wave of pleasure and affection, and bites his bare shoulder gingerly before he still lifts himself up, looking with hazy eyes into the young man's pleasure-pierced face, scrutinizing his smooth chest heaving hard with breath. "You okay?" he asks just to be sure, looking closely at the curve of his cocky smile, the way his tongue runs across his pale lips before Matthew looks up at him.

"Do you think I'll have to clamp the locket between my teeth if I top?" he asks, squinting a little mischievously. Brown himself hums contentedly at the thought. "I think that would be hot" he says, swishing his tail slightly.

Will can't help but grin at that, leaning in again to steal another kiss. Matthew's mischievous attitude is picked up by him very easily, and he pulls away only to hurriedly remove his pants, and Brown hurries to do the same, unlike him not embarrassed by his nakedness and immediately removing his underwear as well, leaving only the pendant around his neck, which now catches Will's attention. They both sit up now, and Matthew moves closer to him, kissing him on the lips again, his hands sliding over his shoulders and forearms as Graham massages his scalp again.

He leans over, pushing Will down, covering him with his body, resting with hands on either side of his head on the mattress, looking down at him. Matthew licks his lips, trying to catch his breath a little. "I'll just have one small, um, plea" he tries to sound still as mischievous, but Graham realizes he needs to listen carefully now because this tone of voice is just a defensive reaction. "We'll do without any pet names. Well, unless you want to call me dumbass when I deserve it" Brown smiles as he looks into his face and Will nods, swallowing, all the while shifting his gaze from his lips to his eyes.

"I'm not much of a talker anyway" he remarks, touching his bare back, and Matthew bites his lip at such a light caress on his lower back, near the base of his tail.

"I noticed," the young man smirks. "Well, I'll do the talking for the two of us, don't worry" he winks at him before he starts kissing and lightly nibbling his neck again, and Will knows for sure that there will be marks left on it, and lots of them. Brown moves lower now, scratching

his chest with his teeth and then tracing his left nipple with the tip of his tongue before taking it captive to his lips and Graham shudders, gasping as he buries his fingers in Matthew's dark hair, squeezing it lightly and feeling the vibration from the young man's moan. Brown continues to kiss his body, breathing hotly, returning to his face, showering it with tender kisses until Will smiles stupidly in love and scratches his back gently, immediately pulling himself away, remembering the scars that had just begun to heal. He starts to worry again against his will, and finally decides to do it his way, ending up again on top of Matthew, who bursts out into light laughter. "I'm about to get dizzy from these flips" he jokes, and Will pauses for a few moments, admiring his relaxed contented face. Heavy breathing sounds between them, and it's like the world narrows to just the two of them for a few moments. He remembers that Matthew, before they came up here, called it all "romance" and now Will feels like this is really it. He feels passion along with tenderness, and looking into his handsome face, slowly stroking his torso, he can't imagine how anyone could want to hurt him. He feels like the wind, ruffling his pale skin, mussing his hair, gently swaying the stem of a plant, but not hard enough to rip it off. Will covers his eyes, lips sliding lower down his body, kissing his thighs, scraping them lightly with his teeth until he's close to his cock, exhaling, scorching it with his warm breath before touching the tip, looking up. "Will..."

Matthew, meeting his gaze, throws his head back against the pillows, feeling that this is too much and that he needs a little time to adjust to what's happening. Graham tries to take his time too; it's not like he's done anything like this before, only imagined what it might feel like. His imagination was really vivid, though, so in a way he'd practiced before. Theoretically. In reality, of course, it all turns out to be a lot more exciting than in his fantasies of handsome strangers from college or his old job. He was emotionally switched on now, open, greedily absorbing every emotion, every movement and every sound coming from Matthew - his quiet breaths, his moans, his deep purr that came as something of a surprise. His tail moves tensely, and the brush occasionally slides over Will's bare chest, launching a herd of goosebumps across his body. He takes it a little deeper, hiding his teeth, one hand lightly squeezing his thigh and the other taking his tail gently, trying not to squeeze it, just hold it.

Matthew gasps, trying to find Graham's head with his hand without looking, to bury his fingers in his hair, feeling the burning desire to touch, to increase the area of possible tactile contact. He squints, biting his lip, still making quiet sounds of pleasure. In his slightly heated mind, he thinks about the fact that he wants to feel Will's touch all over his body at once, and it seems like a pipe dream worth living for. He wants to kiss him, but he doesn't want Graham to stop even for a moment, tucking his toes in with pleasure and clutching his brown strands with his fingers. "Shit, Will..." he almost whimpers, sensing he's getting close, and forces himself to look down at the man, losing himself in admiration at the beautiful brown strands falling in curls across his forehead. Matthew moves them away from his face in a gentle, delicate motion, and Graham moans softly, covering his eyes. His beautiful long lashes seem even more beautiful to Brown than ever before, and he feels like a spectator watching a theater play made by a brilliant director, falling in love with the lead actor. His tail begins to wag more vigorously against his will, and the way Will gently holds it back only heightens the sensation. Brown feels on edge, and he really wants to kiss the man right now, at this very moment. He tugs lightly on his strands, hinting to pull away. "Will... kiss me" he begs, sobbing with emotion, and Graham, at first reluctant to let him pull himself off his dick, obeys nonetheless, breathing heavily through his mouth until he's at his face level again.

He kisses his chin first, then the corner of his lips, and only then covers his mouth with his tongue, muffling his new moan as he returns his hand lower, beginning to move gently over his cock wet with saliva. Will feels like he can't get enough of his kisses, wanting to feel his hot mouth on his all the time, and it makes his head spin. Even when they break off the kiss, he freezes just a few millimeters from his face, hearing his sweet moans, mewls, almost catching them with his lips. Matthew's body is incredibly responsive, which seems almost surprising given the circumstances, but Will doesn't let himself think about it; instead he keeps moving his palm over his dick as Brown continues to whisper his name and scraps of phrases like *"so good,"* said almost painfully, or *"fuck, Will, I'm gonna-"* cut short by a new moan. Graham feels his own arousal almost as well as Matthew's, but can't bring himself to touch his own cock, too engrossed in pleasing his lover. One palm is wrapped around his dick, moving him ever closer to orgasm, and the other is on his beautiful, taut abs, stroking them with a share of palpable admiration, and Will can't remove either of them.

He gazes up into Matthew's face as he once again moans, gasping his name, cumming, and it seems to Will an incredibly beautiful touching picture. Slightly flushed cheekbones, lips ajar, eyes slightly rolled for a couple moments. He seems even more of an angel at this moment than when Graham watched him sleeping in the morning, peaceful and blissful. So charming, so cute, like a young man from marvelous paintings.

He feels as if Brown's scent has completely filled the room and it's proving to be something incredible but he still can't get enough of it; Will kisses his lips before moving down to his neck, nibbling it lightly and breathing in so close his incredible scent, his pheromones must be driving him crazy but he can't stop, feeling surrounded by warmth from all sides. Matthew, breathing heavily after his orgasm, wraps one arm around him, stroking his strong back before rolling over, and they both giggle slightly when Brown's pendant hits Graham's cheek. Matthew peeks into his eyes before taking the necklace into his mouth, continuing to smirk as he does so, and Will stares at it, flinching only when he feels his palm getting underneath his boxers.

Brown, as if sensing what he needs, leans in, giving him full access to his neck, and Graham kisses his pale skin as if in gratitude, wrapping his arms around his shoulders, coming rapidly closer to his orgasm, breathing heavily, tickling him with his breath, making Matthew smile with the pendant in his mouth.

As he comes, he accidently bites down a little harder on the pale skin, and Brown releases the pendant from his mouth, moaning slightly audibly, shuddering with his whole body. "Fuck..." he exhales in his ear, and Will doesn't feel a single conscious thought in his head for a couple of moments, staring up at the ceiling, mindlessly stroking Brown's back as he lies on top of him.

He moves his hand higher, stroking his hair and soft ears, hearing a satisfied mewling near his ear before Matthew still lifts up to look with a sleepy smile into his eyes. Will slides his gaze over him, stopping at his neck, seeing a bit of blood. "Shit" he exhales, feeling anxious and a little guilty. "I bit you."

Brown grins, licking his lips. "I know, I love you too" the young man says and rubs the tips of his noses with him before kissing him softly on the lips.

"I... you're bleeding" Graham exhales but obediently covers his eyes as their foreheads collide gently.

"Mm... sexy" Matthew says and the man snorts.

"Little freak" he says, lightly squeezing his strands with his fingers. With his other hand he touches the slight bloody mark on his neck, wiping it gently. "It would be good to treat it. And... wipe everything off" Will awkwardly remarks, and suddenly Brown smirks, flashing a look of his bright mischievous eyes. He begins to move gently down his body lower all of a sudden. "Matthew? What are you- *oh god"* Graham throws his head back, hiding his eyes in the bend of his elbow as the young man begins to lick the cum from his skin, removing his underwear and tossing it aside, gently sliding his tongue around, careful not to miss a drop. Will has to accept what's happening, trying not to think about the fact that it's both a little weird and arousing at the same time. "You're crazy" Graham exhales and Matthew laughs lightly, kissing his thigh one last time. "You know that we should go take a shower anyway" he says as Brown rises again, continuing to almost lie on top of him. The pendant falls on his chest, slowly rising and falling with his breathing.

Matthew sighs, continuing to lie there, not giving Will a chance to get up, and Graham almost gives up, beginning to stroke his back, his fingertips circling up his spine and down to his tail. Brown gasps quietly, shuddering, and the man is about to move his hand higher, but then he feels the hardened cock resting against his thigh again. He ponders it for a couple moments, feeling the hot breath against his neck, and yet he touches the sensitive spot again, caressing it gently, listening to the excited breathing next to his ear. "Shit... Will..." the young man whispers, rubbing against him in search of some extra stimulation, blushing slightly with embarrassment; it wasn't normally an erogenous zone, and none of his former lovers had ever guessed at it, but Graham was playing him skillfully, like if he was a musical instrument, making him feel goosebumps up his spine and moan softly as he tucks his nose into the spot beneath his ear. He worries that such sensitivity might confuse Will, but he keeps touching him, as if trying to figure out how to do it better, how to make it more pleasurable, and eventually he does, doing it so right that Matthew is left only to moan softly, hiding his face in the curve of his neck, moving his hips until he finally cums a second time, making a low mewling sound and staining Will with his cum again.

After the exertion comes a welcome relaxation, and he exhales, rubbing his forehead against Will's hair before still laughing a little embarrassed. "That was nice. Where did you learn that?" he jokes.

"Sometimes it’s insane what they teach us at the academy..." he jokes too, and Matthew smiles in a way that makes his cheeks start to ache and he kisses his neck and then his stubbled chin and finally his lips, looking into the man's eyes with a mischievous light. "Okay, now we're definitely going to shower" Graham says, and, ignoring Brown's protests, sits up on the bed, giving him another kiss on the lips as a consolation.

Despite all the whining, Matthew expectantly follows Will into the shower like a tail after a dog, and in a couple minutes they're in a clean bed, terribly tired and warmed by the hot shower. Brown kisses him for a while longer - "come on, did we brush our teeth for nothing?" – before finally relaxing and getting under the covers. Sleep never comes to either of them,

though, and Matthew pulls out a dragon-shaped lighter and starts playing with it gently, telling Will about Francis and the asylum, peacefully watching the flame with him. Graham gradually falls asleep after all, and Brown still sets the lighter aside on the bedside table, sighing and snuggling closer to the man, falling into sleep for a couple hours as well.

After midnight, they are both awakened by the whining of the dogs near the door. Matthew frowns unhappily and swishes his tail, and Will sighs, realizing what might be the matter. "I completely forgot to walk them tonight" he lies there for another minute or so, talking himself into getting up, before still getting out of bed to Brown's disgruntled mooing. "It won't take long, Matthew" Graham says softly, leaning over and kissing the young man on the cheek as an apology, and he reflexively smiles sleepily without even opening his eyes. Will knows that he won't really be able to sleep unless he's around, and so he really decides not to linger, quickly putting on his pants and a t-shirt.

He opens the bedroom door and walks downstairs to the dogs piled up by the door. Matthew continues to lie there with his eyes closed for a while, but then he gets cold without warmth around him, and he sighs, deciding to get dressed and go downstairs too - they missed dinner, and he wouldn't mind making up for it by eating at least a little bit, maybe some sandwich or chocolate cereal. The thought about food encourages him to stand up.

Brown puts on Will's white t-shirt and his pants, yawning and twitching his ears sleepily. He adjusts the pendant around his neck with a smile and picks up the lighter he hasn't left anywhere out of sight since Graham gave it back to him, and then leaves the room, rubbing his face with the palm of his hand. Only stepping onto the stairs does he suddenly frown and sniff, sensing something amiss. It takes a few extra moments for his sleepy brain to finally wake up, and it’s as if his body had been abruptly doused with ice water - he realizes he can smell the gasoline odor settled tightly in the air of the room.

He freezes for a moment, and then abruptly rushes down to the first floor. "Will!" he calls reflexively when he sees Graham lying on the floor, and he runs up to him, anxiously trying to figure out what's happened. There's some blood on his temple, as if he's been hit with something, and Matthew tries to bring him to his senses in a panic, wrapping his palms around his face for a couple moments and then shaking him. "Will!" he calls out again, but at this point he twitches his ears, feeling someone coming up behind him, and is about to turn around, but it's too late - someone's strong hands are already grabbing him, covering his mouth and pulling him away from Will. Brown tries to resist, and in that moment Max comes to help him, first barking menacingly and then trying to pounce on the mercenary, but the latter, swearing, throws the dog aside with a kick, dragging Matthew out of the house. Panic and fear are in the young man's eyes and he tries to break free, but in vain, and he can only watch as other strange men pour more gasoline on Will's house right in front of his eyes.

He mumbles something into the palm of a hand that's gagging him as he sees one of Mason's mercenaries set a Molotov cocktail on fire, but there's nothing he can do but twirl around in the man's arms in a pathetic attempt to break free and get back into the house, the threshold of which catches on fire with golden flames in the blink of an eye. In a desperate attempt to do something about it, Matthew bites down with all his might on the hand that is restraining him with his fangs and only then gets literally a couple moments of freedom, immediately trying to run back into the house for Will, but he is already being grabbed again. "You don't

have to cover his mouth, let him scream as much as he wants, jeez" he hears a painfully familiar male voice and reflexively turns his head toward Verger, still trying to break free from the tight grip like a mad dog off the chain. Mason gives him a calm satisfied smirk. "Hey, kitten. Did you really think I wouldn't find you? How naive of you" he tsks and shakes his head, then smiles and steps closer, possessively placing a hand on his shoulder, peering into his fear-filled eyes. Matthew can't focus on him now, desperate to get back inside to save Will or at least burn with him; everything inside him is screaming about how terribly unfair this is, that it's not how things should be. Part of him hopes that this is just another nightmare, and any minute now he'll wake up in Graham's arms and he'll surely comfort him, maybe even agree to stay up with him the rest of the night talking in an attempt to distract him from the horrors of his subconscious. He wants to wake up, but he is utterly unable to do so, and only makes pathetic attempts to break free of the tight grip. "What happened, has the cat got your tongue?" Verger teases, and then circles his hand around the sight of the increasingly flaming building. "Look at this, don't you like it? I remember you once told me you wanted to burn me alive - I was really hurt by your words then, yeah. I believe burning that reckless… fan of picking up dirty mutts off the road alive would be comforting enough for me, don't you think?" he grins at him, and Matthew naturally hisses at him unrestrainedly, showing his fangs, but it only makes Mason laugh. "How passionate, look at him! I like it" he snaps him on the nose and Brown almost manages to bite him, but the Verger's hand manages to slip away at the sound of his laughter.

The fire continues to engulf the house gradually, and Matthew can't formulate any concrete thoughts; he feels like a teenager again, being held back by the firefighters, preventing him from running inside to find the person he cares about. He tries to break free, but his body gradually tires of this desperate futile effort, and Brown feels moisture on his eyes. Suddenly a leather gloved hand grabs him painfully by the chin and Mason holds a small napkin to his face, collecting his tears. "There you go" he smirks before removing his hands and placing the napkin in his pocket montpensier and lighting up with a victorious smile. "Well I hope you enjoyed this little vacation of yours, now it's time to say bye-bye to dear uncle and the doggies and come back home to daddy" he waves and opens the door of the black car before gesturing to shove Matthew inside. His arms are pawed tighter and his wrist is restrained with a zip tie before he's carelessly tossed face-first into the passenger seat. Sinking into the leather upholstery of the seats, the young man feels despair, guilt and anger. He can still feel the prickly stubble of the unconscious Will under his fingers, and as he sobs and tucks his ears back against his head, he can only think that now he has an obligation to kill Mason, even if it costs him his own life. He doesn't care.

The fire has once again taken away his most precious treasure, leaving not an ounce of hope inside.

He is all alone again.

Will regains consciousness gradually, feeling a strong pain in his head and someone's tongue licking his face persistently. He frowns, trying to understand what is going on, and opens his

eyes; his senses gradually return to him - first tactile (he is lying on the cold ground and he seems to be covered with something - is it a coat?), then hearing (fire crackling nearby and dogs whining), then smells (smoke, gasoline) and sight. Everything gradually comes together by pieces, and he remembers what seems to have happened only a short time ago. The fire in his house is still going, so he must not have been unconscious for too long; and yet, in addition to the pain from the hit to his head and the coughing caused by smoke inhalation, he has a couple of burns, and his white T-shirt is burned to holes in several places. Will sits up worriedly, frowning at the familiar outline of the coat he's been covered with - it's the same one that was thrown over him when he rode in Hannibal's car to the hospital a couple of days ago. The man looks around for the dogs, counting them just in case, and only exhales in relief when he spots the seemingly missing Max on the other side of the road, whimpering agitatedly and circling around himself, stopping occasionally to stare into the distance. Graham rubs his face with both palms, then forces himself to his feet. He doesn't drop Lecter's coat, putting it on in an attempt to hide from the fall chill, and focuses his gaze on the window of his house. There's still some kind of fire burning inside. He doesn't think it makes sense for him to be dealing with it right now. Too late anyway.

He looks over his shoulder in the direction of the pack, trying to figure out what to do with them, and then clings his gaze to the barn, to which he heads, waddling a bit, whistling, calling out to the dogs to follow. It's not a bad place to wait it out for a while, and there are a few small exits from there through which even Max could get out in case of emergency; there were also blankets for them to hide in from the cold this night while Will wasn't around. It seems like the only sensible option to him at this moment, but he still feels sorry.

Graham takes the spare gun he hid there a couple of days ago from the stash in the shed and checks for ammo before going outside. Max tries to follow him, but he won't let him, only rubbing the whining dog's ears reassuringly. He hopes they'll be okay.

Hannibal's coat gives him a few answers about what happened and at the same time adds new questions to replace the previous ones. Did Lecter save him by pulling him out of the fire and leave him outside the house, himself heading to... the Verger's place? How did he know about the fire in the first place? The session. He had a session with Mason. He said something about a fire, hinted probably, and Hannibal decided he had to do something about it. But why didn't he warn him beforehand in that case?

Because he obviously didn't want to avoid escalation of the conflict. He wanted things to reach a boiling point, a point of no return, when Will would simply have no choice but to get Mason. And yet he'd given him time to come to his senses on his own, perhaps deciding to sort things out himself. Why? Why not wake him up and put a gun in his hand, commanding him to go and solve his problem, kill the dragon? Was he disappointed in him? No, not that. But then what's the point of all of it? Graham continues to trudge down the abbreviated path through the forest, breaking branches along the way, soiling Lecter's already damaged coat. Coat. Will frowns, trying to find something in his pockets, and feels the folding knife and the crumpled note, and stops among the thin tree trunks to pause and read the words in the moonlight. *We both have promises to keep.*

Will clenches the sheet in his fist, looking up, and then sighs, continuing to make his way forward with a resolve deep in his gaze. *The woods are lovely, dark and deep, but I have*

promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep, and miles to go before I sleep...

Chapter 19

Matthew stares into the void, still not uttering a word; his face is pale and expresses no emotion as Mason wanders back and forth in front of him talking another load of crap. His throat is dry, and he feels the zip tie binding his wrists almost painfully tight. He recognizes this room - fairly small and near the main corridor, which means they're not even trying to hide him. Well, of course, what would be the point of it? There's nobody to look for him anyway. It's dark outside the windows, they're not even curtained, and from a painting across the hall, a witch being burned at the stake of the Inquisition stares at the scene in the room with a reproachful look. Matthew finds the expression on her face mesmerizing, and he focuses on it for a long time, until his entire field of vision is blocked by Mason standing across from him. Brown grudgingly looks up with no emotion, thinking about how pathetic he's going to be when the fire consumes every part of his body, sending burns under his skin and smoke into his lungs. A pig.

"...I hope this will be a great enough lesson for you" Verger says, "and you won't try to escape again by ingratiate yourself with some village samaritan" he snorts, then leans closer to his face. "You can't be so selfish as to doom some more cute puppies to suffering, can you?" he scoffs, tilting his head to the side and then suddenly frowning slightly, catching his gaze on something. In the next instant, Matthew is grabbed by the back of his neck with a gloved hand and he reflexively jerks his chin to the side, clenching his jaw, catching his breath. "And what do we have here?" Verger asks, and Brown feels him painfully press a finger against the fresh bite mark Will made last night. "Tsk-tsk-tsk, and how did you let this happen, Mr. Brown? How did you let some fool treat you like that? It's out of any bounds..." the touching stops for just a moment, Matthew continues to look away, showing no emotion as suddenly Mason grabs his necklace. "Listen to me. And I hope you'll listen to me very carefully, kitten, because I'd really hate to feed you to the pigs ahead of time" the thin necklace presses hard on the back of his head and Brown still looks up into the man's face, tense and worried but trying to hide it behind an indifferent mask. "When I say something is mine, it means it's mine. Playing cat and mouse is certainly fun, and I have to admit I was impressed with the way you killed two of my men, but it's time to stop. If you still haven't realized it, you've belonged to me for a long time now, and it's up to me to decide what happens to you next. No one else is coming to your rescue, and if you start giving me headaches again, I'll turn your skin into a bath mat. You've made daddy very angry."

"You're disgusting," Matthew says in a level voice.

"Not that much, stop being dramatic" Mason says and then pulls at the necklace again until the clasp breaks and he clutches the pendant in his palm. Brown looks at it with a sense of anxiety inside. It's all he has left of Will, aside from what he's wearing now and the bite mark on his neck. It's as if he's afraid to move for a few moments, afraid to give away how much he cares about this thing, but Verger seems to realize it perfectly well enough anyway, and with a smirk hides it in his jacket pocket. "I'll find something better for you. Such a nice neck like that should be adorned with something more interesting than this garbage. How do you like the idea of getting another tattoo?" he smiles cheerfully, and Matthew doesn't react, silently looking up at him from below like a cat watching its prey. "You know, my

grandfather had one of your guys. Daddy never told me exactly what for, but you and I can take a guess, right? With all our experience. Well, once he used this knife," Mason pulled a folding knife out of his pocket, showing Matthew the sharp blade, "to cut off his ear for disobedience. Don't get me wrong, I, personally, really like your cute ears" he touches one of them with the tip of the knife, grabbing his hair with his other hand, "but I'm also very careful about respecting my family's traditions. So be a goody-goody, for both our sakes, hmm?"

Brown doesn't see much point in it now. "So you're going to cut off my ear, skin me for a rug and then feed me to the pigs, am I getting the train of your thoughts right?" he asks, giving Verger a cheeky look. "Dude, I hate to break it to you, but I don't care. You lost any chance of pressuring me when you decided to burn down my home" he spits out, but Mason only laughs, amused by his perky attitude.

"Your home? You lived there for what, twelve days? Ah, you cats get attached so fast. It's pathetic" he sighs, and then, squeezing his hair harder until it hurts, brings the sharp point to the scar on his chin, renewing the cut. "You know, usually it only takes cats a couple months to get over their ex owner and get used to a new one. And I'll make you forget about that unlucky doggie lover even faster than that, don’t worry. Well, you know. Lobotomy does true miracles sometimes!" he exclaims enthusiastically, letting go of his hair and spreading his arms wide apart.

Matthew stares at him in silence. He recalls one of their conversations with Will in an attempt to escape reality and not let that psychopath see even an ounce of his emotions. The young man had gotten out of the shower then, walking into the bedroom and seeing Graham sitting on the bed with his eyes open but as if he wasn't present in the moment; Matthew waved his palm in front of his face but he didn't react until he touched him. Will flinched then, and it was as if he'd come back to reality, but he didn't look too disturbed, like he did after sleepwalking. Brown asked what was that, and the man said he had been fishing - in his imagination, of course. He said it helped him relax after a hard day, and Matthew only joked that normal people watch porn in such cases. Will rolled his eyes adorably, asking, "is that what you usually do?"

"Did I ever say I was normal?" Brown chuckled then, lying down next to him on the bed, covering his eyes and snuggling against Graham's warm body with a smile.

"And what are you doing then?" asked Will, habitually burrowing his fingers into his dark hair.

"Watching bird videos" Matthew replied, and Graham chuckled, so the young man decided to continue. "I really am. They're so entertaining. I used to love chasing pigeons as a kid when my mom and I would walk in the park. She'd call me stupid and tell me not to do it, but I could see it amused her, so I kept at it. Even when I grew up a bit."

Will stroked his hair thoughtfully with a smile, feeling peaceful. "What are your favorite birds now?" he asked softly, tucking one of his strands behind his ear, which immediately yanked up, and his tail started swishing even before he opened his eyes and looked up at Graham, smiling. He endured only a couple of moments taking a deep breath, and then for about half an hour told him with admiration about hawks, and Will really listened to him, almost never taking his eyes off his excited face.

Now this memory seemed like a safe place to which he could escape. His own river, his fishing. He thought about how cool it would be to go fishing with Graham, or even alone, to catch fish for him and cook it, surprising him. Scraps of unfulfilled memories cut painfully into his skin like shrapnel from an exploding grenade, but he can't stop thinking about it. It drains him.

He exhales slowly, flinching and looking around a little confused when he hears loud music. He knows where it's coming from, he remembers it, the speakers in the pigsty where Mason liked to do his little cruel experiments. He too seems a little confused, freezing and listening to the sound, saying something to himself, and then sighs irritably. "It's that... Donatello or whatever his name is again!" he addresses to one of his mercenaries, feeling dissatisfied with the interrupted session of weird parenting. "I swear to god, he's overstepping his bounds. Getting drunk and acting like he's at his own house. Idiot" he sighs annoyed, looking at Matthew again before making up his mind and smiling. "Patrick and I are going to go deal with someone who likes to abuse my hospitality, while you have some fun with Shura - I promised him I'd give him some opportunity to avenge his brother who you, stupid kitten, killed during your idiotic attempt to escape" he turns to the blue haired mercenary, who seems quite young and sort of frail, but Matthew somehow doesn't doubt his skill and, more importantly, his desire to inflict pain. "You hurt kitten too much, I'll cut off *your* ear, skin *you*, and send *you* to the pigs instead of him. So be good when you play with other people's toys, okay?"

Shura didn't answer anything, continuing to chew on his gum.

"Do you understand me, idiot?!" Mason still demands an answer.

The mercenary rolls his eyes, but then nods. "Понял я, истеричка."

"I have no idea what you just said, but I hope it means you get it" he looks at Matthew again, smiling. "Have fun! Don’t worry, daddy will be back soon" and gestures for the other mercenary to follow him, changing his face expression in a moment.

Brown swallows, looking tensely at the silent mercenary who squints at him. He has tattoos on his face and a scar on his nose, and is clearly determined. As the door closes, he sighs, stepping closer, pulling out the folding bag clutched under his armpit, and unfolds it on the table next to Matthew's chair. Throwing a glance in there, he expectantly sees sharp instruments, apparently for torture. That's not cool. He presses his lips together, looking at the blue-haired man again.

"I am not allowed to mess up your pretty face or cause any… irreparable injury - you know, things that only the boss can do," Shura says in a lazy voice with an accent as he slides his fingers along the edge of the bag next to the sharp blades, as if choosing which is best to take. "It limits my freedom of action, but it doesn't mean I can't hurt you enough" he sighs, pursing his lips and then turns away, walking over to another table. "You killed him with a fucking statue. It's hard to think of a non-lethal equivalent for that."

He looks around the room, pondering, and Matthew decides not to waste any time, certain that this is his last chance. The music is still playing somewhere nearby, and it's loud enough to drown out the sound of the lighter being opened, but Brown decides to shuffle his foot on

the floor to break the sound just in case anyway. He has to do it a second time to finally get the fire and, pressing his lips together in order to not make a sound from the pain of the burn, burns through the zip tie, freeing his hands. He mentally sends his best wishes to Francis Dolarhyde, trying not to give away the appearance of being freed yet so as to be able to match the best timing.

Matthew licks his lips, casting a quick glance at the bag of torture blades on a nearby table. It takes him about three seconds. Shura has a gun, but he's not likely to dare use it, at least not to shoot him for sure. He might try a punch. He wasn't a very large build, even shorter in stature than Brown himself, but he was obviously well trained since he worked here. Matthew continues to trace him with his gaze as he walks over to the new desk and sighs. His back is to him, and Brown decides to act now, quickly grabbing one of the small scalpels, immediately hiding it in his hand again, accidentally cutting himself. He manages to remain unnoticed only by a miracle, because after a couple seconds Shura does turn to face him again and smiles. "I'm going to gag you first, if you don't mind. I don't like loud noises, my ears are very sensitive," the mercenary remarks, and then he leans over with the knife from his kit and cuts off part of Matthew's white T-shirt, cutting into his skin a bit, and Brown wrinkles his nose in slight pain, looking the man straight in the eye.

"Won't Mason be pissed that someone other than him is allowing himself to put something in my mouth?" Matthew sarcastically asks mostly for distraction, and it works - Shurik grins, pulling away slightly and crumpling a piece of cloth in his hand.

"Boy, if you hadn't killed my brother, we could have been just wonderful mates" he shakes his head, bringing the makeshift gag up to his mouth, "say 'aaaah', kitty-boy".

"Aaaah" he obediently does, but as soon as the cloth is very close to his lips he sharply jabs the scalpel right into the mercenary's neck, causing him to open his own mouth in pain and shock. Matthew immediately kicks him in the groin, forcing him to take a couple steps back; the man tries to reflexively touch his neck, letting go of his knife, and Brown stands up and immediately picks it up, then cuts the distance between himself and Shura with fury, stabbing him in the stomach before pushing him to the floor and, in a fit of uncontrollable desperation, stabbing him a few more times, feeling the blood on his body and hands. He gets even more dirty as Shura pulls out a scalpel in what must be an attempt to stab it into his body, but loses a lot of blood too quickly and can only let go of his only weapon, dropping it on the carpet beside him. Matthew grabs him by the collar of his shirt with one hand and pulls the dying man closer to his face. "Your fucking brother tortured me for months, motherfucker!" he says, and then slaps him across the face with his fist before starting to feel calmer. With a dead stare, Shura looks away, blood continuing to gush out of him rapidly in several places, a particularly large puddle forming near his neck. This is a mess that could only be gotten rid of by fire, Matthew thinks, standing up and taking the knife with him.

He thinks some more, looking over the bloody body, and takes the gun as well. He wouldn't want to kill Mason with a headshot, but it was still nice to have something he could defend himself with in case of an emergency. Matthew really wants to complete his mission, and nothing is going to stop him now. He reaches his hand to his chest to touch the pendant, but it isn't there, and he wrinkles his nose in annoyance, turning away from the corpse and heading with a confident and quiet gait toward the hallway.

Brown walks, navigating by sound, occasionally moving his ears to get a better sense of direction. He clutches the pistol tightly in his hand as he cautiously turns into a new section of the corridor, and is confused when he sees several mercenaries lying unconscious on the floor. He frowns, thinking for a couple moments, and cautiously approaches one of them - there's a heartbeat, so they're not dead. This alarms the young man, and he pulls their guns from their holsters, stashing them in a nearby dresser just in case. He walks with his weapons at the ready, opening the wide doors between the corridors of the different parts of the manor, and the music becomes even clearer, but quite suddenly stops altogether. It gets very quiet, and Matthew treads even more carefully, practically tiptoeing down the corridor. He remembers his mother teaching him how to shoot. It helps him focus.

Suddenly around a new corner he hears a strange noise, quite quiet, and, standing carefully at the edge of the wall, he peers around the corner, frowning in confusion as he sees from behind some man in a plastic suit on top of the usual one, strangling some girl until she passes out, and then carefully placing her on a small couch, making sure she doesn't hit her head. It's then that Matthew first realizes it's Margot, and then focuses his gaze on the man just turning to face him, and sees Hannibal. Their eyes collide and Brown raises his eyebrows. "What the hell…" he says softly, lowering the muzzle of his gun a bit. He tilts his head to the side and chuckles weakly. "A wolf in sheep's clothing."

"Cat in the bag" Lecter says calmly, quickly looking him over from the side. "This isn't yours, I suppose?" he asks, hinting at the blood on his t-shirt and skin.

"No" Matthew keeps his gaze on him, slowly stepping closer. "And those were… yours?" he points behind himself with a nod, alluding to the unconscious mercenaries lying around.

"Yes," Hannibal answers discreetly.

Matthew opens his mouth. *"What kind of psychiatrist are you?"* Brown frowns, but immediately shakes his head. "No, you know what, I don't care. Where's Mason?" he asks decisively, gripping the gun harder in his hand.

"In the pigsty, I think. At least the music was coming from there."

"So it wasn't you who turned it on?" Matthew asks perplexed, trying to make sense of this puzzle.

"No," Hannibal replies calmly, and Brown frowns at him confusedly, slowly shifting his gaze toward the right door.

Will isn't too surprised to see the unconscious mercenaries lying in the corridors of the manor; he doesn't check their heartbeats, realizing that Lecter is unlikely to have killed them (how can you let so much meat just go to waste?), but treads cautiously between them until he finds the pigsty. There's only one man there, and he looks drunk, talking to the pigs from upstairs, and Will sneaks up on him from behind, hitting him in the temple with the hilt of his gun before searching him and tying his hands together, laying him face down on the floor - an old habit from his days as a police officer finally comes in handy. Looking around, he notices speakers connected to some kind of music system, and without a second thought walks over and turns them up to full volume. The pigs, unexpectedly roused by the music, begin to move

more vigorously through the maze, as if waiting for something, and Will, frowning, tilts his head to the side, watching them for a minute or so before he steps back and hides, like a predator lurking between the trees watching for prey.

Like a fisherman casting a bait and waiting for a foolish fish to get closer, bite his hook.

Graham wondered if Mason would follow the same corridors he had traveled, noticing the bodies of several of his mercenaries along the way. How would that make him act? What would he think? It's unlikely he would come to such an obvious trap alone. Will checks the gun in his hand, pondering how fair it would be to kill someone other than Verger. At this point, though, it's a matter of survival, not morality. He leans his back against the wall, taking a slow exhale, letting that thought run through every cell of his mind, when he suddenly hears the doors open. Will holds his breath as he listens to Mason's footsteps and seemingly those of only one guard beside him, and the man's loud, irritated voice as he tries to shout over the music and the squealing of the pigs. Graham sees him walk over to the sound system, turning it off, and decides not to hesitate for a second; quiet as a fish, he cuts back to the mercenary standing with his back to him and hits him in the temple with his pistol before grabbing him by the collar of his jacket and pushing over the fence and down toward the pigs, who are as enraged by the music as hungry stray dogs are by a bone thrown to them. The man is trying to resist, and Will has to put in a little more effort. He shoots him in the shoulder from such a small distance, causing him to wail in pain and still loosen his grip for a couple of moments, which is enough for him to fall down. Graham immediately turns around, eyes blazing, to Mason, who turned at the sound of the commotion and froze in shock, and Will immediately pulls his gun on him.

There were a few moments of silence. It is suddenly interrupted by Verger's laughter, his amusement by the situation, and Will wrinkles his nose as he touches the cold muzzle to his forehead, feeling a sharp prick of disgust and a desire to end all this as soon as possible. "You do know how to surprise a man, Mr. Graham!" he doesn't seem to be too much bothered by the gun in the agent's hand.

"Where is he?" Will asks coldly and tensely, looking at the glasses' panes and thinking about how they might cut painfully into his skin at a blow.

"Those little kitten of mine? Oh, don't worry about him, he's having fun right now - just like we do now. Well, almost," Mason is relaxed, he waves it off, leaning back slightly a couple millimeters with a smile; Will thinks about what's behind his words and tilts his head slightly to the side, not stopping to look at Verger, trying to figure out the best strategy of action. He's technically probably already killed one man - or rather, contributed to his death, judging by the sound of the pigs not being squeamish about eating human flesh. It shouldn't be too hard to just shoot and kill this one, but he doesn't want to do it that way. He doesn't feel like it will help him satisfy his thirst Hannibal told him about. It won't feel *just*. It won't feel *enough*; what's the point of a bullet, if it’s not capable of conveying his emotions properly?

He takes a half step back, drawing the gun aside, tossing it a couple moments later to the floor, causing Mason to raise his eyebrows in surprise, but he doesn't let that emotion linger enough for him to say anything, lunging forward sharply, knocking the man to the floor beneath him, immediately swinging and delivering the first blow with a clenched fist to his

jaw. Pain pierces his knuckles, but he strikes again and again, breaking the frame of his glasses. Blood splatters lightly on his face, and he keeps his eye contact, grimacing in a fit of all-consuming righteous anger, striking again and again; it's as if his consciousness is leaving him, or being replaced by something else, and he feels a strange urge he can't resist. He holds Verger tightly by the collar of his shirt, stained with his own blood, and with his other hand reaches into his coat pocket, taking Hannibal's folding knife and opening it in one sharp movement. In the next instant, he brings his hand over the body and brings it down sharply, then leads the way down, gutting Mason in one smooth, rough motion, not particularly caring about the integrity of the organs.

There is so much more blood and he can hear the death groan his dragon makes, and his blood is hot on his hands, almost scalding, like it's leaving severe burns on his skin, scars that will leave their mark on his body forever.

That's it. He stares at his defeated foe, feeling the trembling in his fingers, the pain in his knuckles. His clothes and Hannibal's coat are stained in blood, as is his face, and the thought slips into his mind that he's going to let Matthew burn it all in that very barrel in the backyard of his house - the burned-out house. He still hasn't fully realized it, too focused on his actions right in the moment, and it's hard for him to think about it even now; he stares at the bloody body beneath him, wondering if Hannibal would be upset if he just dumped that corpse for the pigs to eat. Somehow, he imagines Lecter would condemn him, saying that that would be the very definition of cannibalism. His mouth twists into a painful smile.

"Will?" he hears a voice saying, but doesn't immediately realize it; his gaze runs over the picture before him, as if he's being yanked out of his imagination, as if part of him thinks it's just another game, someone else's design, but no; the outlines around him don't take on the appearance of his living room or bedroom, he stays where he is, feeling strange, both lost and found.

He hears hurried footsteps approaching him, and only then finds the strength to turn his head, glancing at Matthew who has fallen to his knees beside him. He, too, is covered in blood, his white T-shirt torn, exposing part of his body and a light cut, and he has a gun in his hand, which he places on the floor near his hip with a clatter so that he can free his hands and put his palms around Will's face; his eyes are full of delight and shock, and Graham belatedly realizes that Brown had thought this whole time that he had died in that monstrous fire; his pain touches his heart with a sharp needle, and he covers his eyes, letting Matthew's hands touch him and his forehead lean against his for just a few tender moments. Their lips touch for only seconds, but they both manage to feel the drops of blood before Brown pulls away slightly, shifting his gaze to Mason's corpse, tilting his head to the side, tail waving interestedly. Will looks only at Matthew, breathing heavily, quietly, and there isn't a single clearly articulated thought in his head at this moment.

"Wow," Brown says, sliding his gaze over the blood and the man's broken nose, "what a mess" he chuckles weakly, looking at Will again, into his beautiful blue eyes, and licks his lips, then looks at Mason again for a couple of moments. Graham does it too, still clutching the knife in his hand. "You really did it," Matthew says quietly, returning his soft glossy gaze to Will's face. "For me… For us" he almost whispers, sounding touched, and Graham stares into his bright eyes, absorbed in the moment; it's hard for him to know which of the feelings

he's experiencing right now belong to Matthew and which to himself, but he sure does feel a wave of relief that most likely actually belongs to the both of them.

Will releases the knife from his hand, leaving it near Mason's wound, and raises his hand higher, touching his bloody palm to his jaw line and neck, staining the pale skin, but Matthew feels as if blessed. They watch each other's lips, stretching out the moment before the kiss, and when it happens, Graham feels Brown's desperation and gratitude, his love and passion, his devotion and desire, his intentions toward him. Will feels as if the doors of his mind, even the most secret ones, are open wide for the first time in years, and it feels freeing. That's what the blood on their tongues tastes like - freedom. Breaking the passionate touch of their lips, Graham sees the reflection of his own thoughts in Brown's eyes, and he wants to stretch this moment for far, far longer.

They hear slow, quiet footsteps nearby, and Matthew reflexively grabs his gun, turning around, pointing it in the right direction, but sees Hannibal and calms down, lowering the weapon, looking again at Will, who is also watching Lecter with a complex calmness on his face. "I told you - the dude is fucking suspicious" he chuckles, shaking his head, and Graham stares silently into Hannibal's eyes before looking again at Mason's corpse beneath him.

Lecter steps carefully around them, tilting his head with interest, examining the body. Will's style doesn't look like his, and that seems beautiful to him; becoming is not an instant thing, not a wave of a magic wand, it's a long process, an evolution, it's like Raphael's first child's drawing, already beautiful in its own way, but needing the honing of skill that will inevitably come with the passage of time. These are the first steps, the first creation of a new god. He just invented religion.

"I have to admit, I was mistaken in the way you use the knife" Hannibal says thoughtfully. He'd really assumed that Will would either use it to free Matthew or to deal with the guards. Still, Graham had said he wanted to kill Mason with his own hands; that seems like an interesting improvisation.

Will sighs slowly, picking up the knife and holding it out to Lecter.

Hannibal doesn't take it. "Keep it, this is one of the things you deserve now" he says, shaking his head, "and the coat too."

Matthew frowns slightly confused, shifting his gaze to the coat Will is wearing, only now wondering where it even came from. He reaches out and touches the thick fabric stained with blood as Hannibal takes a seat next to them on the floor, studying the corpse with his gaze. Looking at the pockets on the dark gray coat, Brown suddenly remembers his pendant, and flinches, taking away his hands and quickly finding the right pocket of Verger's tattered jacket with his gaze, reaching into it with his fingers and taking his treasure, clutching it protectively in the palm of his hand, pressing it to his heart. Neither Hannibal nor Will say anything about it, continuing to examine the object of Graham's handiwork.

"I can take it on myself if you don't feel ready yet" Lecter concedes, looking at Will again. He continues to stare at the bloody mess below him. Brown looks interestedly at Hannibal again.

"Mason doesn't need to be demonstrated. He doesn't deserve it. Worse than a pig" Will finally utters, and then swallows, raising his gaze, looking into the therapist's blood-dark eyes. "He… must be... consumed' he says slowly, still pondering each word, and then turns his gaze back to the man's open belly. "By fire or in some other way" Graham tucks the knife into his pocket and slowly stands up; Matthew helps him not to fall, getting up as well.

Hannibal nods thoughtfully as he examines the body, mentally noting which parts have already become too unfit for dinner after the god's wrath. "Why not both?" he offers, raising his gaze and receiving Will's faint nod in response.

Matthew shifts his gaze from one man to the other, not sure he wants to know the answer to his question, but still being too curious not to ask. "What do you mean 'in some other way'? Will? Oh, no, wait- you're not- he's not- *what kind of therapist **are** you?"*

Hannibal replies calmly, smiling faintly as he looks back at him. "The one you need".

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A year had passed. The first floor of the house had to be renovated, which took longer than either of them would have wanted, but eventually everything was brought back to a more or less adequate state. At first it had been unsettling to sleep in their bed again, but eventually they both came to their peace of mind, and Matthew stopped waking up from nightmares of the house burning to the ground – Will was always there for him, and that helped. After a while, Brown even decided to start looking for work again, and (perhaps not without Will's assistance; psychiatrist's love for his unique brain wasn't only something bad after all) soon found himself accepted as a nurse at the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. It wasn't perfect, and sometimes Matthew longed to his work with kids, but it was still medicine-related, so he felt quite content - except for when Chilton was being a total jerk, of course. To somehow compensate for his peculiar working conditions, he'd started pretending to have a lisp again, keeping up a joke that only he and Will could understand. Graham had to admit that it was in a way funny indeed.

Will continued to consult for the FBI because he felt it was his way of helping people; he and Hannibal had once had a conversation about whether Graham was trying to make amends for the killing that way, but Graham had only smiled. "Guilt, Dr. Lecter, is one of the few emotions I don't feel about what happened that night at Verger's mansion" he had said then, and the therapist had been satisfied with the answer and its honesty quite well.

Still, Will avoided committing another murder. His hands hadn't been stained with some man's blood since that night, and he thought Hannibal would be annoyed by that, but he remained tactfully silent, only occasionally trying to understand the nature of his friend's abstinence. Will usually had difficulty answering his questions about it, but at some point he was finally able to find the right words within himself. He hadn't killed because with his first kill he had raised the bar so high that no other person in his field of vision ever since simply wasn't a good fit for a role of his new victim. No one had disgusted him enough for him to actually experience a thirst akin to that of a traveler in the desert.

When he left after that session, Hannibal was left with quite a lot of new food for thought; he had over and over again come to the conclusion that Graham was capable of delighting him with every word he said, of surprising him with every deed he did. He wasn't sure whether it was good or not, but he liked it. It was at the very least extremely entertaining, something that made him smile more often than he had in his entire past life. And in that aspect, it was actually nice after all.

Will knew about his feelings, and so did Matthew. It had really pissed Brown off a couple times, as by nature he was quite testy and jealous, especially when it came to Will, and Graham had caught him hissing or even lunging at the man with a knife a few times. Fortunately, he then was able to separate the fighting cats until irreparable damage was done to either of them. In the end they were able to find some sort of compromise, even if it was

more like a dangerous balancing act on a rope stretched between two high-rises. Hannibal could do whatever he wanted (if Will allowed him to, of course) when they were alone, but the second Matthew was near, Graham's attention had to be on him only. Will didn't usually allow much anyway, though he did enjoy flirting with Lecter - it was always like dancing with a bomb to his chest, and it was, as Hannibal would put it, entertaining. Graham loved Matthew tenderly and passionately, feeling a spiritual and romantic connection with him that motivated him to get out of bed every day; he felt interest and curiosity, a kind of mind connection with Lecter, and that was good too. Even though he sometimes felt caught between two fires, he knew that neither man would ever put him in the position of having to choose, and he had the unique ability, thanks to his empathy, to keep that fragile peace in their small family without letting a pretty cup fall to the floor. Sometimes it was harder than usual, but he always managed to do it with no mistakes.

Besides, he couldn't help but realize that Hannibal and Matthew had some sort of connection as well. He guessed that Lecter felt the need to care for the young man, seeing in him a kind of embodiment of his sister. Brown, for his part, was delighted with the permissiveness he enjoyed in Hannibal's office or kitchen, acting sometimes like an intrusive little brother. He sat on the desk most of the time when he was at the man's house, sometimes falling asleep with a book on the patient's couch while waiting for Will to arrive, and sometimes watching Lecter in the kitchen, learning to cook with him (and he was indeed a gifted student, as Hannibal observed, and Will also enjoyed tasting the results of their joint work, which were always undeniably impressive).

One day at one of their sessions Hannibal confided to Will that he had often thought that he would like to teach Mischa how to cook. Now he partly felt more at peace, as if he had actually fulfilled that lovely dream at least a bit. Graham couldn't and wouldn't stand in the way of that, only hoping that Brown wouldn't do something stupid or seriously attack Lecter (again) after seeing the man's hand over Will's palm resting on the table.

He had a temper. But watching the fireplace and feeling Graham's gentle fingers in his hair usually helped, as well as the food, so it wasn’t that bad after all.

Today was exactly one year after the events at the farm, but Will felt at ease standing at the front door of Lecter's house, waiting patiently for Matthew. When the cab pulls up and Brown gets out of the car, a little tired straight from his shift at the hospital, Graham smiles softly at him, especially when he sees his slightly surprised look. The young man cuts the distance between them rather quickly, twitching his tail curiously. "Hey, why are you freezing here all alone, dumbass?" he asks lovingly, looking into his eyes and adjusting the scarf on the man to better cover his neck from the wind.

"Waiting for you, obviously," Will says. "Don't worry, it wasn’t too long" he touches his smooth cheek with his free hand and gladly accepts Matthew's kiss, covering his eyes and feeling himself melting under his soft lips. After a couple moments, though, Brown bites him lightly, and Graham chuckles, pulling away.

"You should have waited in the warmth. If you want me to play nurse with you again, all you have to do is ask, pup" Matthew says instructively, flicking him gently on the nose, following up by taking the briefcase from his hands to help in a gentlemanly manner. "What's in there?"

"A surprise," Will replies calmly, and Brown purrs interestedly, leaning in close to his ear, making him smile as they knock on the door.

It really was a surprise. Graham thinks about it again now and starts to get a little worried, though he actually realizes it's nothing to be nervous about - both of his men will be thrilled, that's for sure. And yet it was as if he'd been preparing some special gift in secret for a long time and now he wasn't sure he'd gotten it right; knew he'd gotten the idea itself, but was nervous he'd messed up the realization. He hoped that the meat would really be good, and that his efforts would not go to waste.

Already in Lecter's kitchen, he opened his briefcase, first placing a bottle of wine on the table, and then a wrapped package in kraft paper, which Hannibal unwrapped with interest, looking at the piece of meat Graham had brought. Matthew, this time maintaining some decorum and not sitting on the table, not wanting to annoy and test the patience of the homeowner, just stands nearby, head propped up with his palms resting against the tabletop, and tilts his head sideways curiously, tail wagging, shifting his gaze from Will to the meat and back to Will again.

"And what kind of meat is it?" Lecter asks calmly, raising his gaze to the man.

Graham knows the rules of this game. Caution and double meanings. No one likes to talk directly about what they've done, except Matthew; the young man usually always watches his friends' conversation with curiosity, and then disarms them with some one phrase of his own, almost with childlike naiveté shattering the decorations they've built. At their first dinner together, when they knew exactly who was on their plates, he sat in silence for a while, sipping wine and chewing meat, letting everyone enjoy some religious connotation of what was going on, and then chuckled: "you know, I just realized it - I'm the only one at this table who, purely technically, doesn't commit an act of cannibalism right now." Hannibal then remarked that that was a rather controversial statement, and Matthew only shrugged, saying "I'm less of a cannibal than you two anyway." Lecter smiled and exchanged meaningful glances with Will before continuing his meal. Matthew's clothes still smelled of smoke from the fire where they'd burned what Hannibal hadn't deemed fit for the table, and Will could think only of his eyes burning with energy and mirth, paying attention to almost nothing else.

"What do you think?" Will asks now, nodding at the piece of meat and looking calmly at Hannibal. Brown's pupils dilate and he tilts his head more to the side, looking playful, having guessed what's going on.

Lecter returns his gaze to the meat, inhaling its scent as if to ponder. "Veal? Pork, perhaps?" he looks at Graham curiously.

Freddie Lounds annoyed the three of them, though in different ways; Hannibal found her vulgar and arrogant, Will considered her articles tasteless and grating on his nerves, and Matthew had had the misfortune of meeting her a couple months ago when she'd sniffed out that he'd been working for Mason Verger once, having quit shortly before the man had gone missing. Her words had stirred up a lot of unpleasant memories in him, and the things she'd said, the things she'd accused him of indirectly, had left Brown with an unpleasant residue, and he'd returned to Wolf Trap suddenly very grim; his mood had only worsened when the girl had posted another article on her website a couple days later. It had raised a ruckus that

Matthew had had to hide from, and he was lucky that Chilton had by then revealed too many of his secrets to just fire him. He'd given him a vacation, and Brown was partly even grateful. Will had taken him fishing then, but even watching him fish hadn't done much to save the normally always cheerful young man from depressive moods. Graham didn't like it. Memories of that week continued to bring him sleepless nights and brooding moments of showering, and finally he made up his mind. Freddie Lounds was a nuisance, she ruined people's lives doing little good in return. Maybe if she had directed her passion for journalism in a slightly different area, things might have ended somewhat differently for this woman. Unfortunately, she wrote an article about the wrong person, and a couple months later met her death in an abandoned building, to which she had been brought by an anonymous call from a friendly man who had a sensation for her. He texted she will be in all news, said that finally everyone will hear about her. In his own way, he never lies.

It wasn't like with Mason. There he felt anger, rage, a desire for revenge. Killing Freddie felt like getting rid of a pest - there was almost no emotion, just determination, and this is why it was cleaner than the first time. He'd strangled her, cut off some meat in a few places, and last night her body, engulfed in flames, rolled out in a wheelchair to her parking lot. Graham had been called in and had to stay late after work, but it had been worth it. Will didn't know Matthew's reaction yet, but he realized that now, seeing that piece of meat, the puzzle pieces were coming together rapidly in his head.

He handled the surprise well. Meat for Hannibal, fire for Matthew. Satisfaction and restful sleep for himself.

"She was a very slim and delicate pig," Will replies, throwing a slight smile at Lecter before looking into Matthew's eyes, who is almost sprawled across the table, struggling to hold back his words and emotions. A chuckle bursts out of him though and he covers his mouth with the palm of his hand, looking at Graham adoringly.

"Delicate is not the word I would have chosen," he still remarks with a smirk, and Hannibal and Will exchange glances.

"You did this together?" Lecter asks, interested in the details of what happened, feeling a more well-hidden mixture of elation and admiration than Mathew now.

"No," Will replies calmly, pulling the remaining groceries out of his bag. "It felt otherwise, though. Like you were the one who lit the match" he still remarks, looking at Matthew.

"Next time you can just ask, love" Brown says with a smile, starting to circle the countertop, wiggling his tail a little. "You know there's nothing I wouldn't do with you."

"Maybe I will" Graham says quietly, and Hannibal smiles a little, savoring mentally, like tasting the fruit of an apple after a long time still finally ripening on an apple tree. The pride of a gardener who has tended that tree for a year and now admires the first ripe fruit.

Matthew takes Will's hand, looking into his eyes, smiling in admiration and pleasure, and brings it to his mouth, first kissing it and then biting it gently, expressing his most exuberant emotions and making Will smile, too, holding eye contact.

Hannibal offers a dish, the name of which both Graham and Brown hear for the first time and don't even try to memorize, and only quietly agree to help making it. Will slices the ginger and vegetables, while Matthew declines Lecter's offer to do the roasting, joking that everything he cooks "just keeps burning," looking at Graham for a reaction to the joke, getting a barely perceptible curve of his lips that warms his soul from the inside out.

He ends up slicing the meat, placing it in a pan before stepping back to watch the cooking from the sidelines. When Hannibal decides that the meat is done, he asks everyone to proceed to the dining room, and busies himself with serving the dishes, a couple minutes later gracefully bringing them out and placing everything in front of each of the occupied seats, as always talking about the history of the dish they are about to consume.

Dinner goes well and Will allows himself to relax, not bothering his mind with questions of morality, since it has no place at the table. He slowly drinks his glass of wine, keeping in his mind that he still has to drive home with his probably sleeping cat in the back seat, judging by how vigorously he eats and drinks, clearly trying to satiate himself and relax after a long and difficult shift.

Matthew liked his job, finding much to be curious about and feeling good in his medical clothes, and because of that he sometimes overworked, especially before weekends like now. Chilton took advantage of him, loading him up with extra dirty work every time, trusting the cute hardworking lisping cat to keep his dirty secrets about bugging patients and using unorthodox treatments. It deserved Will's censure, but for now, at least for now, he was far more profitable alive than dead, so Graham takes his time, giving the thought time to mature and blossom. He finds it amusing to think that killing Frederick would be a good idea for a date.

"How's work going?" Lecter quietly wonders before taking a sip of wine. Now he looked at Matthew and was asking him, and it was usual, almost traditional already; Matthew would always tell them about some interesting patient for a few minutes, and then they would switch to Will's work, since the FBI usually discovered a new Ripper’s or Copycat’s body before these dinners. It took longer, at least because Graham chose his words carefully to hit the bull's-eye when determining the motives and reasons for the murder, its aesthetic. Occasionally, though, they had to discuss other killers whom Will was already really eager to catch and put behind bars; in those cases, Hannibal or Matthew would sometimes say something that helped him in his investigation, and he actually appreciated their unobtrusive, careful input. After all, his imagination did not have limitless potential, no matter how much Lecter and other psychiatrists idolized it. He really needed it sometimes.

"One of Chilton's patients thinks he's the Chesapeake Ripper" Brown says, sending a piece of meat into his mouth before looking mischievously at Hannibal, the corners of his lips and eyebrows raised slightly at this ironic fact. Will looks at Matthew interestedly, silently encouraging him to continue. "Abel Gideon. Killed his family about a month ago, right around the time of the last currently known Ripper’s murder. I don't know what kind of therapy Chilton is using on him behind closed doors, but I think that's what it's all about" he hums, shaking the wine in his glass. "Frederick is just dying to tell everyone that he caught the Ripper himself. He's all he talks about all the time. Ripper-Ripper-Ripper-Ripper-Ripper. I don't think he's doing it consciously though. He's just too stupid to realize he's imposing

ideas from his own head on a patient." Matthew takes a sip, watching Hannibal look at Will thoughtfully. Then he decides to voice his own thoughts on the matter. "Gideon is lost. He doesn't know who he is anymore" he pauses, waiting for someone to look at him, "maybe he needs help with understanding who he isn't?"

Graham doesn't answer, lowering his gaze thoughtfully before he stabs a new piece of Freddie Lounds on his fork and brings it to his mouth, tasting its flavor in silence before sighing and smiling slightly visibly.

A bit later, Matthew sits down next to him in the car in the front seat, stretching out his legs and smiling, satiated and satisfied with the dinner that had passed. He actually quite expectedly soon falls asleep, wrapped in Will's scarf like in some sort of an oxygen mask, breathing in his scent he liked so much. Graham only silently smiled faintly, casting glances at him as he drove to their house to spend the long-awaited weekend with just the two of them and the dogs. He could already envision exactly how it would go: fishing on Saturday morning, followed by a full day in bed that Matthew wouldn't let him get out of until he'd gotten the sleep and energy he needed through sex and kisses; in the evening they'd play chess or something else if Brown had any special ideas, and they'd end the day relaxing by the fireplace, with Matthew watching the fire while Will stroked his soft hair and touched his just as soft ears affectionately. On Sunday they'd get a good night's sleep, leaving the house only to walk the dogs, and maybe they'd cook something good with the leftover meat for dinner together.

In his reverie, he almost misses the moment when a silhouette on the side of the road comes into his field of vision. He instantly tenses, gripping the steering wheel harder and slowing down as he stares at the dog in the evening fall darkness. It's as if his heart skips a beat or two, and he blinks a few times, as if suspecting a hallucination brought on by memories of last autumn. But no - the dog still remains slowly rambling down the road. Realizing this, he hurriedly rolls down the window and tries to get its attention in a soft voice, which wakes Brown up, blinking sleepily and trying to figure out what's going on.

Will finally stops the car, turning to Matthew and catching his slightly confused warm look. "I... uh... we should bait him with meat. He looks like he's been wandering around in the rain all alone for a while now" Graham says awkwardly, as if he's not sure how Brown will react.

Matthew continues to smile silently as he looks at Will, leaning his temple against the back of his seat, but it's as if Graham is really waiting for his approval first before helping the stray dog, so Brown only laughs softly. "Damn, I love you and your bad habits" he says, and Will smiles in relief, still bending over to steal a quick tender kiss before grabbing a bag with everything he needs from the backseat. "But I'll be the one to choose the name!" Matthew says as Graham gets out of the car, and the man can't help but smile, gently baiting the dirty golden dog with fresh meat.

They call him Winston, after the ginger neighborhood cat from Matthew's childhood. Will likes it. Looking through the mirror into the backseat, where the young man purrs soothingly to the dog, feeding him slices of meat, not caring that he's getting his hands dirty, Graham feels a warm satisfaction with his life, as if he's finally caught a tailwind on his sailboat and is now moving smoothly and steadily forward. Maybe sometimes he would get stormy, but at

such moments he would have those bright green eyes beside him, giving him peace and happiness even on the hardest cloudy day.

And when they collided gazes in bed at their home some time later, Will felt warm inside, knowing that those gentle eyes had in fact already tamed him.

Chapter End Notes

and here is the end! thank you all for your attention to this story, i hope you enjoyed it :) the work will be in the completed status, but maybe after some time i will add a small chapter here, some new epilogue, but in any case not soon. i am starting to work on a new story on this couple! i think it will be smaller, but you know me, i can't stop in time lol.

i will be glad to get feedback!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!